

THE BEAUFOY
ROMANCES
•
HAMILTON DRUMMOND

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THE BEAUFOY ROMANCES



"Our Lady" all in white, with the hood about her head." (Page 109.)

The Beaufoi Romances]

[Frontispiece

THE
BEAUFOY ROMANCES

BY
HAMILTON DRUMMOND

AUTHOR OF
'THE SEVEN HOUSES,' 'A LORD OF THE SOIL,' 'KING'S MATE,'
ETC., ETC.

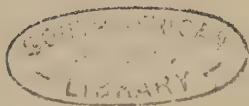
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THE BEAUFOY ROMANCES

HOW BEAUFOY WENT A-WOOING

RAIMOND DE BEAUFOY, hereditary Suzerain of the fief of that name, had at three-and-twenty little cause to quarrel with the world. As for the world, or that portion of it which lay in touch with the borders of Beaufoy, when it was in quarrelling mood it found, time and again, that the young Seigneur had a hard hand, a strong arm, and a long reach—three things which make mightily for tranquillity. It therefore came about that the Seigneurie enjoyed a larger peace than its weaker neighbours.

Peace was much. Peace was internal growth and consolidation, but to peace were added wealth—as wealth went in that year of little grace and great famine, 1438—health, strength, and power. For hard on a score of miles in one direction, and well-nigh as many at right

angles, so as roughly to form a square, Raimond de Beaufoy was lord of life and death. A dozen villages called him master. His cornfields filled the valleys and his vineyards covered the southern slopes. To crown all, his Château of Beaufoy, with its great girdle of gray walls, was victualled and garrisoned as became the house of a man who ruled by love or terror as the mood took him.

Left an orphan when a twelve months' babe, the child's inheritance had been nursed by his uncle, Bertrand de Freyne, as if it were his own, as, indeed, he designed it to be ; but Death having said a brusque 'No' to Bertrand's project, the young heir gathered the fruits of the elder's labours, while the whole suzerainty chanted its *Te Deum*. Bertrand de Freyne had been a hard man.

It is the man who already has his hands full of this world's blessings that looks abroad to add one to their number, and so Raimond de Beaufoy gave himself much thought as to whence he would bring a wife home to the Seigneurie. Birth she must have ; generations to match his own. Youth and health she must have ; for the descent of the line was as much a sacred trust as the transmission of the fat acres undiminished. Of what use to leave his

heir his four hundred of square miles, if he had not wit and strength to rule them? Acres of her own were desirable, not essential, for Beaufoy was a healthy-minded man, and set no great value on wealth that was not his own; not essential—no, but a weight in the scale. Temper, good looks, the domestic virtues, these he set no store upon. For the first, if it was bad he would cure it; for the second, he lived much abroad; for the third, if she knew little of the care of a great house, there were those who did to be had for the hiring. So for many weeks he weighed and measured the damsels of Angoumois, and in the end he pitched upon Denise de Vaucourt.

A week past he had come to this conclusion, and now, as he rode across the summer fields with Marmontel, his squire, at his elbow—for seven generations there had not lacked a Marmontel to serve a Beaufoy—he was confirmed in the wisdom of his decision.

When three-and-twenty plumes himself upon his wisdom, you may be sure that not the lever of Archimedes—could it be mentally applied—would stir him a hair's-breadth. But in this instance Wisdom was justified of its child.

'A day's ride there,' said he to Marmontel; 'it will be that at least with a pack-horse hang-

ing behind. Four days at Vaucourt, or three may be—no need to waste a man's time over such work—and a day home. The week should see us back at Beaufoy.'

'Three days,' answered Marmontel cautiously, 'is but scant time to win a maid's fancy.'

'Chut!' and Beaufoy broadened his shoulders, 'we met once before, seven years ago, I think, and if the girl be won the fancy will follow after—or bide away as it lists. The thing fits well, Marmontel. Away to the south there, Vaucourt marches with Beaufoy for a full three miles, and that there is neither father nor brother to poke fingers into Beaufoy's business counts for much.'

'I have seen three towns taken by surprise,' said Marmontel, 'but never one woman. The jades love a siege, and if they be honest they get it but once in their lives.'

'Nor is there surprise here,' answered Beaufoy. 'Why, man, Roger has been at Vaucourt these eighteen hours, and if Madame the Countess guesses not the meaning of my message, then Denise comes of a dull stock. Am I the man to fling away five days on nothing more than a woman's chatter?'

'She may guess, and Mademoiselle may guess—but, Seigneur,' persisted Marmontel, out

of his fifteen years' longer experience of life, 'there are forms.'

'Chut! Beaufoy will balance the forms,' and the Seigneur laughed. 'This is no match of Bet of the charcoal furnace with Peter the herdsman. If Madame be pleased and if I be pleased, the thing's done. Hold thou thy peace with thy forms.'

'There is little to choose between Bet or Denise, seeing they have, by your leave, women's hearts in them,' answered Marmontel; 'and if it be the land alone she is after, then God help Beaufoy, man and acres!'

'Did I not tell thee, man, to hold thy peace? I can see to myself and my acres, too!' And grumbling to himself, Marmontel, like a good servant, did as he was bid.

The road to Vaucourt was across the Suzerainty, through the broad girdle of forest that framed its fatness on every side, and into a broken country where thicket and pasture-land fought hard for the pre-eminence—a poorer country than Beaufoy, and one that showed clear signs of a loose rule. Here was a herd's cottage, blackened and unroofed, there a haggard in gray heaps of sodden ashes, or a mill with the wheel splintered and great stone blocks thrust beneath its floats in sheer wan-

tonness. That the masterless men who found harbour in the wood preyed as they listed on Vaucourt was plain to be seen. Beaufoy, by reason of its many hangings, they left unharmed.

‘By the Lord, Marmontel!’ cried the Seigneur wrathfully, as they reined up abreast of a still smoking desolation, ‘these rogues have sore need of a heavy hand, and a heavy hand they shall feel. There will be changed times at Vaucourt when Beaufoy grips the reins! Shall we hunt the rascals to-morrow, just to give them a foretaste of what’s to come?’

‘Best hunt the damsel, Seigneur,’ answered Marmontel. ‘Rogues are plenty and ripe for the hanging any day; a damsel is but one, and must be caught when the will moves her.’

‘Wrong!’ said Beaufoy, shaking up his horse, ‘wrong! ’Tis the other way round; but let us get forward in daylight, lest the rope find the wrong men. What a *Te diavolum laudamus* they would raise if they laid hands on Raimond de Beaufoy!’

It was on the edge of dusk when the Seigneur rode up the slope and into the glade where stood the Castle of Vaucourt, a pile less ancient and less massive than Beaufoy, but

lichened and mossy with age. It fronted south, with a semicircle of open space, some six hundred yards radius, on three sides, while behind, a long bowshot off and sheltering it from the north, stretched a dense thicket of pines, oaks, and underbrush. A flight of seven short steps, unguarded by any balustrade, led up to the heavy Norman doorway, with its rounded columns set half within the wall.

There they were awaited by a man apparently of Beaufoy's own age, who, as the Seigneur checked his gallop before the door, came down to meet them, and, stretching out his hand, caught the bridle.

'Give you good-evening, Master Seneschal,' cried Beaufoy, flinging down his reins. 'By St. Francis, thou art young for a major domo. Surely a grayer wit would better match a service hat hath no head but a woman.'

'That I am Madame de Vaucourt's humble servant is true,' answered the other, 'and in these times youth is a pear that soon mellows.' He slipped the bridle over his right arm, and turned towards the door. 'Here, two of you, see to the beasts; and you, Seigneur, have come, like the welcome guest you are, in the nick of time.'

'Marmontel'—and Beaufoy paused as he dis-

mounted, his weight swung upon one stirrup—
‘see thou to the beasts’ housing. No offence,
Master Seneschal. Beaufoy might go seigneur-
less, all for a horse’s colic. Now, man, what of
thy mistress?’

‘That she is in trouble, holds council, and is
in need of thy gray wisdom.’

‘Hark, thou!’—and Beaufoy tapped the other
on the shoulder. ‘Keep thees and thous for
thy fellows, lest thou tastest leather. What is
thy name?’

‘Mark de Vaucourt ; at your service, Seig-
neur de Beaufoy,’ answered the other, laughing.

‘What? Madame’s nephew? Was this a
jest, Messire de Vaucourt?’

‘No jest, Seigneur de Beaufoy ; and if your
gray wit failed to discern between a lackey and
a gentleman——’

‘Right’—and Beaufoy, pausing in his walk,
looked him full in the face—‘right : my wit
failed to discern. What then?’

‘Spare your impertinence, Seigneur de
Beaufoy ; I understand you well enough. To
be frank, we have already a cause of quarrel
within the walls, but the lady’s name is best
kept out of the business. Is that plain?’

‘Sits the bird on that tree? Now I see the
point of the jest ; but no man makes Beaufoy

twice a laughing-stock—no, by St. Francis, not twice! Let us settle the matter, Messire de Vaucourt.'

'Make no doubt we shall settle it, Seigneur de Beaufoy, but not to-day nor to-morrow. As I told you, the Countess is in trouble, and has need of us both. First, shoulder to shoulder for Vaucourt's sake, then face to face for our own.'

They had reached the centre of the great square hall, having paused at intervals in their wrangling, and now Beaufoy, from his two inches of greater height, looked frowningly on the other. It was a new thing to him to be belittled, or even to be claimed as an equal, and his pride was in arms.

'H'm! is this some new jest? For, by the Lord, Messire, I give you fair warning——'

'No jest, but sober earnest. Here it is in a nutshell, and if there is a jest, the laugh is on the sorrowful side of the mouth. César Vigogne has debts; César Vigogne has also a son, and he proposes, with much insistence and a thin veneer of courtesy, that his son shall pay his debts by taking to himself the lands of Vaucourt with Mademoiselle Denise, since he cannot, in reason, seek the one without the other.'

‘César Vigogne?’ said the Seigneur. ‘I know the rascal. A suave bully, he will bless you with all unctuousness, and cut your throat as ‘Amen’ to the benediction. César Vigogne! Beaufoy’s men will settle his insistence once and for all.’

‘Beaufoy’s men will have small chance,’ answered Vaucourt. ‘César Vigogne is four hours behind his messenger, and brings his priest with him.’

‘And how long since——’

‘Three hours, maybe, or a little more.’

‘Then we are caught like rats in a trap? To think there are two score of men rusting at Beaufoy, and we pent up to starve in a hole! Send me Marmontel. Though he risk hanging in his own reins, he must ride for Beaufoy within the hour. In a day, or a day and a half, we shall snap our fingers at César Vigogne.’

‘In a day, or a day and a half,’ answered Mark de Vaucourt, ‘neither you nor I will have fingers to snap. It’s odds that your squire will do us better service here than charging pell-mell through the black of the woods.’

‘Is Vaucourt so weak as that? Then, by St. Francis, we’re shent! Let us to the Countess, Messire, and here’s my hand on it ;

we are brother and brother until we have found God's mercy in this world or the next.'

'Brother and brother, Seigneur,' answered the other, taking frankly the outstretched hand so frankly offered; 'and, from my soul, I believe we have sore need that the mercy be not stinted.'

From the back of the great hall three passage-ways opened—one to right, one to left, and a third facing the entrance. Down one of these—that to the left—Vaucourt led the way, with the Seigneur at his heels, and clanging his long, huge-rowelled spurs as he walked. Pausing at a door, across which there fell a heavy curtain, Mark turned and laid his hand on the other's arm.

'Be brief in counsel, that we may be ready in action,' he said; 'and, indeed, there is but one course open—to hold Vaucourt to the last.' Then he flung open the door. 'The Seigneur Raimond de Beaufoy,' he announced, and drew the door hard behind him.

The room was small, but so ill-lit by its narrow, pointed windows, closely barred, that the three by the table seemed little better than shadows. Of the three, two were women, and seated, while the third, a man, stood behind their chairs. From his deference of attitude,

Beaufoy judged him to be present by sufferance rather than by right, and the event proved him to have been the body-squire of the old Count, now many years dead.

As Vaucourt spoke, the two rose, and the elder answered :

‘The Seigneur comes in a happy hour for us, but an evil for himself. If there were time, Messire de Beaufoy, I would say, ride hence until a day when peace and Vaucourt are better friends.’

‘No, Madame’—and Beaufoy went forward to meet the Countess. ‘Rather the best of hours for me, since, by the grace of God, I will prove that my love for Vaucourt is no courtesy love.’

‘Truly a sturdy growth for so young a plant. Mushrooms have no long life,’ said Mademoiselle Denise under her breath, but with a strain of mocking in her voice.

‘Sturdy and speedy is Beaufoy all over,’ answered the Seigneur, ‘and, with the help of St. Francis, you yourself will say so within six-and-thirty hours. Madame, let us leave compliments aside and come to profitable talk ; Messire de Vaucourt has told me of the insult thrust upon you by César Vigogne. To answer that is no woman’s work, and, with your leave,

we two will take upon our shoulders the form and method of reply.'

'We have no right, Seigneur de Beaufoy——' began the Countess, but the Seigneur, guessing what she would say, stopped her with a gesture.

'You have a double right, Madame: one, the common right of every woman to be defended against the violence of a scoundrel; the other——' And he bowed to Mademoiselle Denise. 'But for the present we will let the other stand; that is the agreement, is it not, Messire de Vaucourt?'

'Let César Vigogne set foot inside the castle, and there is an end to rights and to defences also. All the talk in the world will not change that. For the Lord's sake, let us get to work.'

'My thought, too, Messire. With your leave, Madame, our old friend in the corner—who, I doubt not, knows every nook and hole in the castle—and we two will make a round of inspection. Be at ease, Mademoiselle; if there is a bridal at Vaucourt this night, I promise you, faith of a gentleman, the priest will have light enough to read his book by and witnesses in plenty, though they be dumb ones.'

With which strange comfort Beaufoy led the way back to the corridor.

The circuit of the house disclosed more than

one point of weakness ; but chiefly Mark de Vaucourt was troubled by a passage-way, which, opening from the back of the great hall, passed through the cellars, tunnelled the earth for a furlong northwards, and had its outlet in the underbrush of the sheltering belt of timber. That the outlet was so well concealed that a hunter with a leash of hounds might have passed it by was but a half-comfort, since, if it were once discovered, nothing but an inch-thick oak door, midway along the tunnel, blocked the approach.

‘ Let Vigogne put a petard under it,’ said he, ‘ and it flies to splinters in a snap.’

‘ If Vigogne has petards to spare, he’ll win Vaucourt by a shorter road than this,’ answered Beaufoy. ‘ No, no ; he will try the great door, as a gentleman should, and let the worst come, it will go hard with us if we cannot hold the hall for thirty minutes while the women find safety, and by this road. Let it bide as it is, say I ; but, Master Squire, have spades and mattocks down here, and hands to work them. Why, I will tell you presently. Now, De Vaucourt, let us back to Madame.’

The women they found waiting them at the head of the corridor.

‘ Thus and thus is the plan,’ said Beaufoy,

giving Mark no time to speak. Lead he would, for all that he was but a stranger and a guest. 'We are ten men, all told. Enough to hold Vaucourt for a week if there was no such thing as saltpetre in the world and but one flaw in the defence. But, what with a rotten window here and a tottering door there, not Talbot himself could hold the place, weak-handed as we are. Two are wanted by the windows, where the bars are thinner than makes for comfort; one by the east door—friend Hugues here will do; four with me at the secret outlet.'

'You take good care of yourself, Messire de Beaufoy.'

'By Saint Francis, Mademoiselle Denise, for myself I care no whit; but I make the best of the chances, and bad they are at the best. César Vigogne, I hear, has thirty men at his back.'

'Then you think, Seigneur——'

'I think, Madame—to be blunt is kindest—that if César Vigogne does not grudge us six feet of Vaucourt land, his priest may have other work than marrying to do before the sun's at noon.'

At which Mademoiselle Denise turned to De Vaucourt and caught him by both hands.

‘Mark, Mark, and it is my fault thou art here!’

Whereupon Beaufoy laughed a hard laugh.

‘And I,’ he said. ‘What of me?’

‘Mark came for love’s sake, Messire,’ answered she across her shoulder; ‘but you, you know best why yourself.’

Through the silence that followed Beaufoy’s ear caught the patter of hoofs on the turf, then came a jingle of bridle-chains, the stumble of feet on the steps, and three resounding blows struck with a stout riding-whip on the panels of the door, and with such a vigour that the hollow of the great hall echoed. Again Beaufoy played the master. Brushing all pretences aside, he went straight to the point.

‘So you have come, César Vigogne, and, having come, had best ride home again, lest you raise such a hive about your ears as has never yet buzzed in all Angoumois.’

‘God’s mercy! here’s a knot on the cord!’ they heard him exclaim. Then, louder: ‘Open, fellow! I have knocked once, who am not wont to knock twice in courtesy.’

‘The courtesy of César Vigogne!’—and Beaufoy laughed. ‘The courtesies of the seven hangings of Marvaulx! the courtesies of the wreck and burning of Neuchamp! By St.

Francis of Beaufoy, a closed door is more wholesome at this time of night! Are you answered with your courtesies?’

‘Beaufoy! Beaufoy!’ cried Vigogne, stamping his foot. ‘What the plague does Beaufoy here?’

‘Ay,’ answered the other. ‘Beaufoy! Beaufoy! Buzz! buzz! do you hear the hornets, César Vigogne?’

There was a silence, and when Vigogne spoke again it was in a changed tone.

‘Listen, Seigneur! With you I have no quarrel, nor, indeed, with anyone in Vaucourt; but I have come for a certain thing, and, by the saints, that thing I will do! Six years ago De Vaucourt pledged his daughter to my son Jacques, and——’

‘It is a lie!’ answered Beaufoy. ‘Quit lies and come to the truth.’

‘It is true,’ replied César Vigogne; ‘so true that none can contradict it. Yet, leave that aside. My point is this: Marry Denise to Jacques I will!’

‘Mademoiselle de Vaucourt is pledged to a gentleman now in the castle,’ said Beaufoy coolly. Dropping his voice, he turned to the others as they stared at him, and went on: ‘By the Lord, it’s true! For what else are

Vaucourt and I here? Whether it be to me or Messire Mark, Mademoiselle Denise is as good as pledged, and whichever wins, God help the man who comes between us!' Then louder: 'Are you answered, Messire?'

'Leave pledges to me,' replied Vigogne bluntly. 'Marry Denise to Jacques I will! That is Vaucourt's affair, and not Beaufoy's. Ride home in peace, Seigneur; with you I have no quarrel.'

'Hist!' said Beaufoy, going to the door and bending so that his lips touched the crack by the post. 'Hist! speak lower. Is there a trap in this?'

'No trap, but clear sense for me and for you. Am I a fool to bring the Seigneurie about my ears for nought, or you a fool to risk—tush! there is no risk; the thing's a certainty—to risk, I say, your life for another's gain?'

For a moment Beaufoy stood rubbing his chin, as was his fashion when in deep thought, then he said:

'If a man could save his honour——' and stopped.

'There is no haste,' cried the other softly. 'Take till midnight, and ride off in quiet. There is always the secret passage.'

‘What? Speak lower still, man. You know that way?’

‘Ay, I know it; a twist of the crow and the door is open, and tell me this—what chance has Vaucourt? But I will smooth your way and salve your honour. Listen, Beaufoy; I pledge you this: no soul in Vaucourt shall cry “Shame!” upon you ever after. Ha! you understand. What the grave hides is well hidden.’

‘But I have three men; I must save them!’

‘And welcome; the fewer for me. Till midnight, then; and, Beaufoy, tell Madame, my mother that is to be, that you have bought me off. There will be the worse watch.’

‘Till midnight,’ answered Beaufoy softly, and straightening himself, he stood listening to the iron heels of César Vigogne clanking down the steps. Then he turned to the group at the farther end of the hall, and turned to meet a tempest. ‘By St. Francis!’ he cried in no polite mood, ‘are you all gone mad that you bay at me like so many dogs? Here does César Vigogne of his folly give us three hours’ grace, and because I take them you call me coward and traitor! Let the event speak, Madame; and as for you, Hugues, thrust that blade home again till nearer cock-crowing. De

Vaucourt, surely you understand? Ay, well, now listen: Madame and Mademoiselle, do as you will about your beds, but let the lights go out as if Vigogne and his rogues were fighting the English—as I would to the Lord they were, instead of beleaguering honest French folk—then, in the dark, and softly, barricade the doors and windows open to attack; let this be your work, De Vaucourt. Hugues, do you send three men after me to the secret passage; my business lies there.'

'Seigneur de Beaufoy, be generous and give us your pardon,' began Madame. 'It was our ignorance.'

'The fault was mine,' interrupted Beaufoy; 'how should you fathom a man's duplicity?'

'But, Seigneur,' cried Mademoiselle, 'is there nought that we could do? Believe me, we could not rest.'

'Why, yes; make me some twelve feet of a linen pipe of half the thickness of a little finger, only, for the Lord's sake, let the windows be dark. Now, my friend, my three fellows and their tools.'

Snatching a lamp from the table, he turned into the passage-way leading to the secret outlet, and strode down it with such a heavy tread that they could hear his heels ringing and

echoing in the long hollow of the vault. Then the trampling ceased, and in its place there came the screeching complaint of the oak-door creaking unwillingly back on its rusty hinges.

‘A masterful man,’ said Madame.

‘A masterful man,’ echoed Mark de Vaucourt; ‘for that I owe him no grudge.’ Then he added, looking at Denise: ‘I would we had nineteen more like him, and were well rid of the score in twelve hours.’

Whereupon Mademoiselle laughed.

‘It is not enough,’ said she, ‘for a man to be masterful; and if César Vigogne permits, the riddance will come smoothly enough’—and the fire on her cheeks found an answer in his eyes.

Meanwhile, De Beaufoy had his three men hard at work.

‘A crow-point under this flag—gently, gently! No need to chip the edge. Now, two mattocks at this end and that, and heave! Saints! men; have you brawn in your backs, or the basting of fatted calves? Heave, I say, heave! So—that is better! Now this one—good, good! Now another, and yet one more! Four? That will do for the surface.’

They were working ten feet beyond the

oak-door, and, under Beaufoy's orders, had stripped the passage of its heavy flagging in a direction inwards towards the castle, rearing the heavy slabs in lines along the wall.

'Now, mattocks and shovels; two of you work, and one rest. Faith! how the soil grips! What's that—a stone? Good! Have it within the door; its use will come presently. Stay! run you and crave from Madame a blanket or sheet, or some such thing. Meanwhile, dig on, you two, and with a will; our time is shorter than agrees with comfort. Ay, that will do. Shovel out the dirt upon that, and busily—busily. Do you pick out the stones and pile them apart. Thank the Lord there is no lack of them! Now work, and for your lives!'

When the pit was some four or five feet down, Beaufoy stopped the sinking, and bade them drive the shaft not alone downwards, but outwards, until he judged it suited his purpose. Then he told them curtly they might rest, and he himself went to seek Hugues the Squire.

'Give me,' said he, 'a stout box, a pot of pitch, a brush, and cannon powder. I will set such a fougasse for these rogues as will teach them much of the art of war if they but come that way, and live to tell of it, which I doubt. The piping, Madame. By St. Francis!'—and

he held it up in a coil—‘a snake, a veritable snake, and one that shall hiss and bite, or my name is not Raimond de Beaufoy!’

With his own hands he smeared the box inside with pitch, and filling it to the edge with the gray explosive, he placed it carefully in position. Then, having given his serpent a full feeding, he fixed the end of the fuse in the powder and built it into its place with loose stones, which he very carefully set in order until the bulk and weight satisfied him.

‘Now earth, and stamp it down well—so. Drag the cloth and what remains over, inside the door, and set the flags in place. Good! a fair craftsmanlike piece of work. Presently they will sink, but, faith of Beaufoy, they will lie even long enough to fool César Vigogne.’

Scraping aside the clay from the extreme edge of the flagging, he carefully buried the linen fuse, bringing the end up inside the oak door. This he closed and bolted, and then returned to the hall of the castle. The lamp he left behind him, but so placed that the door lay in shadow.

The hall he found a groping darkness, with just enough of life whispering down the dim corridors to set the nerves tingling, but that nerves and Beaufoy had little acquaintance.

Against the door lay a great heap of tables, armoires, and such-like furnishings.

Presently he found Mark de Vaucourt.

‘Give me two stools and a dice-box,’ said Beaufoy. ‘Needs must that I keep awake by hook or crook. If César Vigogne comes scratching on the panels presently, or calling softly, as belike he may, let him scratch and call, but for the Lord’s sake give no sign of life. The dice? Ay, now the stools. So—that promises well. As you go your rounds, Messire, do not forget Beaufoy down in the cellars.’

Tucking the stools one under each arm, he disappeared into the black vault of the passage, but with so light a tread that not César Vigogne himself, had he had his ear to the keyhole, would have heard a stir of life.

An hour later and what the Seigneur had forecast came to pass. There was a stealthy shuffle of feet on the stone steps, a stumble in the darkness, and a muttered curse, and then a silence, and after the silence a thin tattoo of finger-nails on the door, followed by a muffled voice—‘Beaufoy!’ thrice repeated, each time with a rising note—‘Beaufoy! Beaufoy! Beaufoy!’ Then again the stealthy shuffle of feet, and the watchers in the upper windows saw the waiting troop draw off to the south until

it was lost in the night. Then Mark de Vaucourt went to seek the Seigneur.

Beaufoy he found seated on one of the stools, with his back to the door, his legs thrust out before him, the second stool between his knees, and busy throwing dice upon its top, alternately left hand against right. At the sound of Vaucourt's footsteps he set down the box and looked up.

‘Well?’

‘Vigogne has ridden off to the south.’

‘Then he will come back by way of the north. I know the feeble cunning of his kind.’

Dropping his chin upon his hand, he rubbed it softly; then, reaching out, he took up the dice-box again, and let fall the dice into it slowly.

‘Cold steel,’ he said, out of the thought that was in both their minds, ‘will go cruelly hard against the grain after this night’s brotherhood; and, to tell the truth, there is no woman in the world good enough for men to split friendship because of her.’

‘Then give her up,’ answered Vaucourt, ‘and let us be brother and brother to the end. Plainly she has no wish for Beaufoy.’

But the Seigneur shook his head.

‘Plague take it!’ said he. ‘There is such a thing as a man’s dignity. As for wishes, what

are they in a woman? Nought!' and he snapped his fingers. 'Listen,' he went on, 'I will play you for her. Dice-boxes instead of a puddle of blood; and, besides, the time hangs plaguey heavy.'

'Are you mad?' cried Vaucourt. 'Why, man, I have loved Denise since I knew what love was.'

'Faith!'—and Beaufoy laughed. 'I might say the same, and never know the throb of a pulse.'

'Then give her up!' cried the other again. 'For, Beaufoy, Denise——' And he stopped.

'Ay,' answered Beaufoy, 'and had I known that thirty-six hours ago, I had not been sitting here now waiting to play a sharper game with César Vigogne than dice on a stool-top; but, being here, I must carry the thing through. I catch your meaning. You love her, and she you; and to dice for her would be sacrilege for you as for me to dice for Beaufoy. Ay, I see that; but to me who neither love nor am loved it is the fairest of games. By St. Francis! I have it! I will play left hand against right for her, and on the honour of Beaufoy, if I lose, I make my bow at sunrise, César Vigogne permitting.'

'And if you win?'

'If I win'—and with his open palm he smote

the stool in front of him—‘then win her I shall, though all Vaucourt came between. Let me see: the left—ay, that is you; it is nearer the heart. A pretty conceit, faith! I give you first throw, Messire. My word! but I hope César Vigogne will be gallant enough to hold his hand until the game is played.’ Taking the dice-box in his left finger-tips, he raised it above his head, shaking it, and reversed it on the stool. ‘Ace, tray. Faith, a poor throw! Now, then; right hand for Beaufoy. Cinq, quatre. I lead you, Messire—I lead you! Throw, Vaucourt, throw; ’tis the best of three. Tray, quatre. Eleven to nine, and a throw in hand. Deuce, quatre. It is well, Messire, that you are here to bear witness that it is an honest game. Your last throw, Vaucourt, and a noble one. Double six; ’tis a lead, indeed. Now, St. Francis, for Beaufoy.’

With the box poised in the air, he paused, listening. ‘Nothing? I thought it had been César Vigogne.’ Down came the box with a rattle. ‘Tray, six; Beaufoy wins by a point. Welcome to my poor house that shall be, Messire de Vaucourt!’

‘Do you think,’ said Vaucourt fiercely, grasping the Seigneur by the shoulder and shaking him—‘do you think I hold myself bound by

such a mummer's chance as that? No—by God, no!

‘Keep your hands for César Vigogne, Messire,’ answered Beaufoy. ‘For me the thing is settled. If you wish to fight it out in another fashion, why—— Ha, saints! what is that? The assault is on in front; though if Vigogne thinks to batter in the doors, he must swing a heavier sledge than that. Come, man, come!’

Leaping to his feet, Beaufoy sped up the passage, grasping at his sword-hilt as he ran. Five paces behind him was Mark de Vaucourt; but midway he stopped and waited, listening, then turned back. From behind came the sharp scream of dry timber, ripped and splintered, and as he watched he saw, in the dull flicker of the lamp, the door heave.

‘A feint! a feint!’ he cried. ‘Rouse them in the castle, and then this way, Seigneur; the attack lies here!’—and rushed headlong down the tunnel.

At the cry Beaufoy paused, and, stooping, he saw Vaucourt seize the lamp and hold it to the fuse, and there was a spurt of flame.

‘Run! for the Lord’s sake, run!’ he shouted.

But Vaucourt, still holding the lamp, bent forward motionless. There was an instant’s silence, a rumble, the bulging of the oak door,

a rush of gray smoke, and utter darkness, and through the darkness a roar and crash that sent Beaufoy staggering to the wall.

‘Mother of God!’ cried a voice behind him; ‘what has befallen?’

Looking behind him he saw Denise, a rush-light flickering in her hand:

‘You, Messire de Beaufoy?—you? Then, where is Mark? Coward!’ she cried—‘coward to leave your post!—coward!’ And as she ran past him into the darkness she smote him with her open hand upon the face.

Still stooping, Beaufoy saw her set the light upon the floor and draw a something from the wreck of fallen earth, saw her sink upon her knees and lay Mark de Vaucourt’s head upon her lap. Then he set his teeth hard and sought Marmontel.

‘César Vigogne is paid in full,’ said he, ‘but I have enough of wife-hunting for this time. Let Mademoiselle Denise cleave to her fraction of a man, for, by St. Francis, he can be little more!’

Nevertheless, in the long day’s ride to Beaufoy, the Squire had wit enough to keep a silent tongue, lest the debt due by the woman should be levied off the man.

II

BEAUFOY'S WARD

It is no great thing that an honest-hearted gentleman should forgive an injury. That he should not only pardon scorn and contempt, but be ready to set his life at stake for his contemner, is much more marvellous ; since a sword-thrust for the body counts less than a pin-prick to the spirit. Yet this, for all his pride, did Raimond de Beaufoy.

That the scorn was a woman's scorn turns it still more to his credit ; for a man can measure himself with a man, and give and take blows which presently heal and are forgotten, whereas a woman's contempt is as a whip-stroke on the face that leaves a weal, the stinging heat of which keeps it well in memory.

The day Beaufoy rode from Vaucourt his heart had been hot and wrathful. When Denise de Vaucourt nursed her maimed cousin Mark back to life, and married him for all his battering, Beaufoy still treasured his anger ;

but with the slipping away of the months and his busy life here and there, its fierceness deadened. After all, he was Raimond de Beaufoy, and the other no more than Mark de Vaucourt. If a foolish woman chose to fling what she called love into Vaucourt's scale as a make-weight, and cozen herself into thinking she had the best of the bargain, it showed she did not appreciate the possibilities, and so was no fit mistress for Beaufoy. Passion of that sort—passion that set lightly by the Suzerainty—would play havoc with the fame and power of Beaufoy. So, as his wrath cooled, he found himself not alone well rid of the woman, but with a kind of comfortable gratitude to Mark de Vaucourt.

Indeed, so well was the affront of his rejection forgiven that he was now, four years after his heart-burnings, straining every power and energy Beaufoy possessed to succour his old rival.

What had befallen Mark de Vaucourt was the sure fate of the man who thrusts out his arm farther than he can draw it back. Bitten with an indiscreet zeal to ape the stern justice of his more powerful neighbour, he set himself a task beyond his strength—the task of clearing out the brigands, free-riders, and the like from

the woods and fastnesses that bordered on Vaucourt. Beaufoy's hinds and herdsmen lived in peace, why not Vaucourt's? So, with commendable enthusiasm, he set himself to a campaign of sudden death.

For a time all went well. The wolves he hunted dwelt singly or in pairs, rogue not trusting rogue, and the greater boughs of the oaks of Vaucourt took to themselves cheering, but perishable, adornments that swung and turned and danced to the piping of the wind. Then the inevitable happened. The isolated atoms of humanity drew together, as in mercury globule draws to globule—not from love, not from trust, but from need—and Vaucourt was face to face with a coalition that knew not God nor regarded man.

Much of this Beaufoy knew, but he was not the man to poke his fingers into his neighbour's business. The Seigneurie was turbulent enough in all conscience, without its master adding to his cares by the righting of another man's follies. A direct cry for help was another matter. If lord did not stand by lord, why, there was an end to sieurs and seigneurs; besides, had not Mark de Vaucourt saved him from saddling Beaufoy with a fool as mistress, and so made him his debtor?

He was sitting by a small table under the great Beaufoy oak that grows to the south of the château and shades the Justice-room, when Vaucourt's messenger, his beast staggering and crisp with sweat that had foamed and dried three times in the wild ride, flung himself from the saddle and stammered out his news.

'Softly,' said Beaufoy, setting down the lance-head he was polishing; 'a word at a time tells much. Whose man art thou? Messire de Vaucourt's? So, so. And what plague has taken Vaucourt?'

'A plague of men, if they be not devils, Seigneur. The castle is beset.'

'So!' repeated Beaufoy. 'Who leads them? There is a truce with England.'

'Satan himself, I think,' answered the man. 'They are forest reivers, Seigneur, and swarm like mad bees.'

'What! the rogues have dared? Listen, friend, and keep a cool wit. Who sent thee?'

'Mark de Vaucourt, Seigneur.'

'And to me?'

'To you, Seigneur, and to ride redspurred, though I killed my beast. "Take another," said he, "by force or goodwill, but take it and ride on. This is life or death."'

'And the message? Briefly, now.'

‘For the Lord’s sake, to save Vaucourt a second time, as you saved it once, for it is in a still more evil case.’

‘Ay?’—and Beaufoy sat back on his stool gnawing his under lip. ‘Much I gained by the saving. As for thee, I give thee this much credit, friend : thou canst talk straight as well as ride straight.’

For a full minute he sat rubbing his chin and thinking silently, then said : ‘I have no mind for a second fool’s ride.’

‘Seigneur’—and in his earnestness the man pressed forward and laid his left hand on Beaufoy’s knee—‘my master is no coward, and yet his message was, “It is life or death.”’

‘What? God’s mercy! wouldst thou teach me my duty, fellow?’—and, leaping to his feet, the Seigneur thrust him staggering aside. ‘Marmontel! Marmontel! St. Francis! where is Marmontel? Let the tocsin be sounded, and the word passed “boot and saddle” for all save ten men. Go thou, friend, eat, drink, and rest thy bones; though, if I know aught of a hard ride, the two last will come easiest, but especially the drinking. Marmontel, I give you half an hour, and let the men eat standing. Leave Flemish Peter in charge, and bid him

trust no living soul till I return. This may be a two days' business.'

A prompt man was Raimond de Beaufoy, ill to cross, hard to drive, a staunch friend and a stern foe.

It was but little more than noon by the dial on the south tower when Beaufoy, with four-and-twenty trained men trailing behind him in two long lines, set out across the autumn stubbles. The distance was, perhaps, some twenty leagues, but to arrive with blown horses and men over-weary for action would have been to play the game straight into the rogues' hands. There was, therefore, no great pressure of speed, and twice he called a fifteen minutes' halt for rest and baiting.

So long as the path lay across the domains of Beaufoy there was but little need for caution; but once beyond the bounds of the Suzerainty and within the shadow of the great wood lying to the south, the Seigneur bade every man ride silent; yet, for all they heard or saw of life—save wild life—they might have sung and chattered at will. The men of the woods were at Vaucourt.

Into the Vaucourt pastures they rode at a trot, and were soon taught what fate awaited the Castle inmates if their relief was late.

Even the poorest hut was roofless, the meanest cottage a charred ruin, and not once nor twice the peasant owner hung from his own lintel. He had been fool enough to say 'No' with overmuch vigour. Of women or children they saw nothing, save once, nor had they time to search. That once sufficed. Men can see men mishandled and keep their phlegm, but when it comes to babes and creatures but little less helpless, it is another matter.

'Let me but catch the villains!—Lord God, let me but catch them!' cried Beaufoy between his teeth, and rammed his spurs home. 'Do what Thou wilt to me hereafter, Lord God, but give me, I pray Thee, a free hand this day. Come, men, we must ride hard, though the beasts die for it.'

For half an hour they galloped, no man speaking, so that the only sound was the rhythmic beat of the horse-hoofs on the firm turf. Then Beaufoy, who rode first, flung up his right hand as a signal, and, tightening his reins with a jerk, dropped into a walk. They had made a circuit, and the gray front of Vaucourt showed through a sprinkle of trees.

At a sign Marmontel ranged up alongside the Seigneur.

'Slip off, and go ahead for news. The few

minutes will breathe the beasts, and we must not lose the advantage of surprise. Fling me your bridle, and make haste.'

Without a word Marmontel swung stiffly to the ground, gave Beaufoy his reins, and ran briskly forward, keeping to the shelter of the timber. Inside of ten minutes he was back, panting.

'It is all too quiet,' he said. 'The great door is splintered and off its hinges, and—and—Seigneur, I like not the look of things.'

'To saddle! Forward, men!' said Beaufoy curtly; and silently, but in disorder, they rode on.

All purpose of surprise was gone, and the one thought in each man's mind was to press forward, and use his eyes first and his hands after.

While still sixty yards from the flight of stone steps, the Seigneur halted and leaped down.

'Let five keep the horses. Marmontel, see thou to that. The rest follow me,' he said, and set off running full speed across the turf, his keen eyes reading signs and reckoning chances as he ran.

Marmontel was right: the door had been battered down and then flung out upon the

grass, that it might not impede entrance. There had been a stubborn defence. The wreck of the doors and the twisted window-bars testified to that. That there was no dead counted for nothing, since the rogues in their escape would carry their fallen with them ; and that they had so escaped was clear, for there was neither voice nor stir, nor so much of life as a face at the windows. But worse than gaping entrances, worse even than the heavy silence, and telling plainly of defeat and plunder, were the black trails, that in no fewer than three places crept up the gray of the walls. Vaucourt had been fired, and it was thanks to the haste of the victors rather than their goodwill that it had escaped destruction.

At the foot of the steps Beaufoy stopped. He would run no reckless risks, for all his certainty that the Castle was empty ; but once his men had closed in and were at his back he ran lightly up, and, with his sword's point well advanced, leaped across the threshold.

'God's mercy!' he cried, checking himself, and those behind him heard the rasp of his blade driven home into its sheath.

Truly the sword had been so busy that there was no work left undone. In the great square hall the chief stand had been made, and on

every side were evidences of the fierceness of the struggle as piteous as plain. The arras was hacked, the hangings trailing in ribbons, the stone flags smeared and pooled and clotted with blood. In the swirl and eddy of combat the antique armour and furnishings of the wall had been overturned, and lay rolled in corners in a disordered wreck. The very panellings of the walls were splintered, and in more than one place the dull oak had taken on a deeper stain.

But the centre of the floor was the focus to which all turned, and as De Beaufoy's men crowded forward, the laggards thrusting aside the first comers as they pushed to the front, jest and laugh and clamour died in a gasp. It would be foolishness to expect a delicacy of sentiment from men whose trade it was to kill, maim, or burn all and sundry to their patron's order, and for a fee of ten crowns a month, private hate or public weal being equally out of consideration; but when it comes to poor humanity, even butchers have their repugnances.

The strife, as has been said, had here been sharpest, and in the centre of the floor the victors had heaped their spoils. There they lay, flung in every contortion of twisted trunk and limb, nine marrings of God's likeness.

That they had fallen far apart was clear from the ghastly tracks smeared across the floor, but in the end they found companionship. Nerveless hands grasped broken blades, and dead eyes looked out on life in dazed reproach, the pangs of staggering beyond the margin of the world still plain to be read.

To those who found them death was common, and so a thing of small account; but the callous crowding of man on man, the sheer indignity to the helpless clay, shook them with wrath, and the silence was broken by a clamour of malediction and cries for vengeance. But these Beaufoy hushed with a shake of his hand.

‘Is Vaucourt there?’ he said. ‘If not, we must search.’

One by one they ranged the slain men in line by the wall, but there was no Mark de Vaucourt, and as they laid the last in his place they turned in silence to the Seigneur, and through the silence there came a cry—a shrill, high-pitched petulant wail—the querulous complaint of helplessness in pain.

‘Let the dead bide with God,’ cried Beaufoy. ‘By St. Francis, there is life at last!’

Turning down the corridor to the left, he ran full speed up the narrow circular stone stairway

rising at its end, following the thin complaining cry. Everywhere were signs of struggle, and for all his haste he noted them; round blots upon the worn steps, the print of an outstretched hand upon the hall, as where a man had staggered in his wild race with death, and once a broken sword-blade. Someone—or more—had fled, hard pursued from below, having work to finish above.

Still following the wailing, Beaufoy ran down a narrow, ill-lit passage-way, and halted at a wrecked doorway—halted to think. The caution of the soldier had come back. But his men had followed close behind him, and now Marmontel pushed to the front.

‘By your leave, Seigneur, this is my place!’ said he, and would have entered.

‘Thy place when thou art Seigneur. Am not I first?’ answered Beaufoy, and flung him reeling backward. ‘God’s mercy, Denise!’

On the bed lay a woman mercifully dead; across her and scarcely human, he was so hewn and stabbed, Mark de Vaucourt; and in a corner beyond the pillow sat an eight months old girl-child dry-sobbing, her little fists rubbed hard into the hollows of her eyes. That much Marmontel saw and the two or three others that crowded at his heels, but they saw no

more ; nor to the day of his death would the Seigneur ever speak, by so much as a hint, of what he saw in that upper room at Vaucourt. Round on his men swung Beaufoy.

‘Hence, all of you!’ he cried. ‘Let one so much as cross the door, and the nine below will become ten. This is a woman’s business or a priest’s, maybe.’

Then he went down upon his knees, and what he prayed and what he swore is known only to God and his own soul ; but those who watched him through the chinks of the broken door, and saw the play of his face, thought there was but little of priestliness in him, except it were in commination.

When he came out into the passage again, he held the still sobbing child clumsily to his breast with his left arm—so clumsily, and with such a plainly unaccustomed air, that those gathered about the stairhead would have laughed for all the tragedy, but that the hard sternness in his eyes cowed them.

‘Let ten bide here on guard and the rest follow,’ he said to Marmontel, as he tramped down the curve of the stairs at the head of his troop, and out into the evening sunshine. Setting the child on the front of his saddle, and holding her firmly there with his left hand, he

mounted, and turning to the north-west, rode into the wood in silence.

'But, Seigneur!' ventured Marmontel, ranging alongside, 'vengeance lies south.'

The Seigneur turned on him with a snarl.

'Beaufoy's ward comes first,' he said. 'We ride for the convent of the Poor Clares. Vengeance can wait, and, by the Lord, it will but ripen in the waiting. Be at ease, Marmontel; these cowards shall find that my arm and my memory are alike long.'

Thenceforward for two hours they rode in silence, and the dusk was thick about them when Marmontel knocked at the porters' lodge of the Convent of Our Lady of Good Hope, and bade the fellow tell the Mother Abbess that the Seigneur de Beaufoy was without on an errand of peace.

'And let her hasten,' added Beaufoy as he dismounted. 'For all our peace, I and mine are somewhat impatient.'

Presently the sliding panel set in the door rattled in its grooves, and from behind the bars of the opened grating a white face looked out. To have the courage of religion is well enough, but the reputation of Raimond de Beaufoy was none of the best, and rumour had it that he held few things sacred.

‘Madame’—and the Seigneur held the child so that the light from within fell upon her sleeping face—‘be this my surety ;’ and in a few words he told her of the sack of Vaucourt, and how that little Denise—‘I make no doubt, Madame, but that her name is Denise, and if it be not now, by St. Francis, it shall be henceforth for her mother’s sake’—heiress of Vaucourt, was now ward of Beaufoy in virtue of his Suzerainty. ‘Keep her for me, Madame. Who am I to nurture such a tender lamb, since—and if it be a sin may the Lord forgive me!—there is but little of the sheep in me. So long as she bides here, Beaufoy will pay a hundred crowns yearly for her up-keep, and more if need be. Be it my part to see that Vaucourt yields it ; and, Madame, for pity’s sake and for the loving tender woman’s nature in you, send to Vaucourt to-morrow. Men can dig holes for men, but Madame de Vaucourt lies there, and there may be others, for we did not search.’

Thus it came that the care of the lands of the child Denise fell to Raimond de Beaufoy, while her nurture in body and spirit was watched over by Our Lady of Good Hope.

In all respects the child thrived. That Beaufoy presently forgot her was to her gain, since she was the more fully left to the gentle

and wholesome teachings of those who kept truth and faith alight in a dead and corrupt age. But if the Seigneur gave little heed to the child Denise, he nursed and fed Vaucourt with such goodwill that there were those who said it was no better than a fief of Beaufoy, and lied in the saying. Beaufoy was no spoiler of the weak, and least of all would he rob the charge that death and blood had committed to his ward. So, for eighteen years the months swung round ; Beaufoy, except for the payment of the tale of crowns, giving, as has been said, small heed to Denise de Vaucourt, when, with little warning, his memory was spurred into wakefulness. It came in this fashion.

Of all Beaufoy's friends, and he had many, none had served him so well or so loyally as Henri de Beaucaire, a Picard gentleman of longer pedigree than purse, and who was, indeed, as poor in lands as he was rich in courage, honesty, and a sunny temper. For eight years the bond of frank faith, good-fellowship, and many dangers risked in common, had bound them fast, and one day as they sat under Beaufoy's oak Beaucaire asked a recompense.

'It is seven years since you married, Seigneur ' he said, 'and to see that noble little lad growing up at your knees fills me with envy. If

Monseigneur de Grandfrai grants leave, give me Denise for a wife, that I, too, may see my children before I am greyheaded and their youth is a burden to my age. I warrant Vaucourt and Beaufoy will be but closer knit.'

Beaufoy set the lad down upon the grass.

'Run to Marmontel, my Sieur, and learn thy sword-play. What talk is this of Grandfrai? My Lord Bishop has his rights spiritual, and I my rights temporal. I pray the Lord the two do not clash, for Grandfrai's sake.'

'But Denise, Seigneur, Denise?'

'Oh, Denise, Denise! I would as soon see thee at Vaucourt as any man; but what of Grandfrai? How come his fingers into the affairs of Vaucourt? Am not I Suzerain? Is Denise not Beaufoy's ward?'

'Theodore of Grandfrai takes leave to doubt it,' answered Beaucaire. 'That much I heard to-day.'

'Whose ward, then? The King's?'

'Nearer home, Seigneur: Grandfrai's himself. He says the widow and the orphan are the peculiar care of the Church, and therefore——'

'And therefore I must toil and plan and scheme for eighteen years to fatten—— Ha! by St. Francis! this must be seen to, lest he marry Denise to the Lord knows whom offhand, and

so the wealth of Vaucourt, of my making, will be a thorn in Beaufoy's side for ever after. That Theodore of Grandfrai should play me such a trick! I took him for a simple matins-and-vespers priest. Speak out, Beaucaire; this touches you as closely as it does me. Is there more behind?"

'Only that young Martin de Chapny——'

'De Chapny, De Chapny? God give me patience! I would have the man hung to his own lintel within the month. De Chapny, forsooth! Beaufoy owes him no goodwill, nor he Beaufoy. We must strike, my friend; we must strike! At last I have found a use for Father Grégoire. The good man must have grown rusty in marrying, and to-day he shall polish his memory. Let every man who can be spared make ready; and, since the riding will be hard, the friar must stick to his saddle, though we tie his legs beneath the beast's belly. De Chapny! God's mercy! Beaufoy has not yet fallen so low as to be tricked by any monk of them all, be he Bishop or begging brother.'

Though from Château Beaufoy to the convent of the Poor Clares, where Denise lay in charge of the gray nuns, was a three hours' ride, it was all too short to cool the Seigneur's wrath. Nay, the heat, the haste and the dust were so

many spurs and goads to prick it into fresh fierceness, so that the evil temper in him grew with the miles. Nor did the sight that greeted his eyes outside the heavy gates of the convent quiet his humour.

‘By St. Francis! my Lord Bishop is forehanded with us. Yonder is a squire with De Chapny’s arms upon his shield. Thank the Lord there is a layman in the case, since to trounce a Churchman is as shameful as striking a woman, and one is like to gain as much or as little by the one as the other. Knock, Marmontel, knock, and be not over-nice about it. Friend,’ he went on, as a scared face looked through the grating, ‘for thy body’s health imperil thy soul a little, and open the door. Raimond de Beaufoy has come to claim his ward.’

Whereat, instead of the door opening the panel slid back in its grooves, and from across the wall came the ring of feet pattering up the hard roadway to the convent, which stood some hundred yards from the girdle of walls.

‘Let six face round, lest my Lord Bishop’s persuaders to the peace of God take us unawares; and do you, Marmontel, and two others pick me out of the wood a stout and heavy

sapling, lest in the maintenance of right and justice and the peace of the Suzerainty it be needful to batter in yonder door. Nay, stay a moment ; our friend of the white cheeks is back again, and not alone.'

This time the panel was untouched ; but after a mighty rasping of locks and shooting back of bolts, the postern to the left of the great door was flung wide, and into the open space stepped Theodore of Grandfrai. A right bishop-like picture he made, standing there in the framework of the doorpost and lintel, Christian prelate from his thin fringe of white hair to his sandalled feet. Unlike many of his day, he carried no insignia of the Church militant about him, saving those of spiritual warfare. A crucifix and a rosary swung from his girdle, the former of silver, the latter of some simple beads. His dress was no more than the gray frock of his Order ; and for all that he was the full figure of a man, the mild benevolence of his face warranted Beaufoy's description of him as a priest of matins and vespers. He might also have added of charity and consolation, but that the Seigneur had never needed such ministrations.

Yet, for all his mildness, Theodore of Grandfrai was no man to forego a jot of the rights of

the Church, or abate a tittle of the privileges of religion.

‘Is this seemly, Seigneur de Beaufoy, to come clamouring at these gates of peace in such a fashion?’

‘Is it seemly, my Lord Bishop,’ answered the Seigneur, no whit abashed, ‘to filch my ward, Denise de Vaucourt, from me on some monkish pretence? So goes the story; if I am wrong I crave your pardon, but, by St. Francis! I claim my ward also.’

‘The Lord forbid that I should so debase my office as filch a ward of thine, or of any man’s. There lies your error. Denise de Vaucourt is ward to Grandfrai, and not all the wrath or browbeating of every lord in France can loose the bond.’

‘Your ward, Bishop — yours? God’s mercy——’

‘Nay, not mine, but Grandfrai’s.’

‘Have done with a juggle of words. Thy ward, for thou art Grandfrai? What, then, of me? Do I count for nought, who have sweated and laboured and planned for Vaucourt these eighteen years?’

‘At whose instance, Seigneur de Beaufoy? Your own and no one else’s. It is time’—and the Bishop squared his shoulders and looked

Beaufoy full in the face—'it is time you learned that to lay your hand upon a thing is not to own it.'

'What!' cried Beaufoy, smiting a clenched fist upon a palm, 'do I want Vaucourt? By the Lord, no! But here is my friend, Messire Henri de Beaucaire, whom I have brought to wed my ward, Denise de Vaucourt, and wed her he shall. By the King's grace, I am Seigneur.'

'By God's grace, I am Bishop,' answered the other; 'and just so much as God outweighs the King, does my right overtop yours. Denise de Vaucourt is orphaned, and to the orphan the Church of Christ is mother paramount. To Messire de Beaucaire I take no exception. An estimable gentleman in all truth, but Denise de Vaucourt is already promised. Her betrothal is this very night, and so little do I fear you or your pretended rights, Seigneur, that I frankly ask your presence and that of any three you will; but let a fifth seek to cross the doorway, and I tell you, Raimond de Beaufoy, that you will set ablaze such a fire in Angoumois as will need the tears of all France to quench. Come an you will come, or bide; it's all one to me.'

Turning, he left the door open behind him, and walked slowly up the path to the great gray

building, of which glimpses could be caught between the laden orchard-trees that closed it round. For an instant Beaufoy sat his saddle, weighing the chances, then he flung himself to the ground.

‘He is right, it were a fool’s deed to split Angoumois on such a question; yet, by the faith of Beaufoy, De Chapny shall not marry Denise de Vaucourt. Come, Beaucaire, follow thou, Marmontel; he said take three, and I will take but two. Hark you’—and he turned sharply to his men—‘let there be no brawlings. Who touches Grandfrai or Chapny, except upon my word, touches me. The Lord forbid that any unconsidered zeal should set Angoumois a-burning.’

Leisurely, and like one who knew that whatsoever was in progress must needs wait his pleasure, the Seigneur followed Theodore o Grandfrai, pausing every half dozen or dozen paces to point out this or that to Beaucaire, as if to set an accent on his slowness.

‘Trust the Church to be well served. Saw you ever such a burden of fruit or such a smooth pleasantness of turf? By St. Francis, if I were not Beaufoy I would be a monk! Not Charles in his beloved gardens is more daintily surrounded. Mark the wealth of

Madonna lilies, and out of season, too; the very air is spiced by them. Poor Clares they call themselves! See the carvings of the doorway, and there on yonder gables; my faith, what better could they have an they were Rich Clares! What, my friend, the Bishop waits us? Ay, ay! lead thou, and we will follow. It were the crime of a heretic to make a Bishop wait!

Behind the great door with its many bolts and studs of metal was yet another barrier, a kind of latticed screen of hammered ironwork, and beyond it lay the cool gray of the broad and silent hall. Crossing this they were ushered into a chamber whose magnificent proportions of width, height, and length might well have been the glory of a palace, even had its mouldings and frescoes been less splendid. Here again there was silence, but a silence tremulous with the life of a great throng strained into attention.

For half its space the room was packed, but packed so that its lower end and three-fourths of its centre were empty. Up between the crowded lines of gray-robed women walked the Seigneur, Beaucaire at his side, and Marmontel two paces in the rear. His eyes were smiling, but his mouth was hard-set, and to one who

knew him it was plain he was in no placable mood.

But it was neither to right nor left that he looked, but in front, where, at the further end of the room, the Abbess stood, a group of her nuns about her, Denise by her side, and Theodore of Grandfrai, with a dozen of his monks—De Chapny in their midst—ranged at her left. Six paces from her he stopped.

‘My thanks, Madame, for all the love and care you have shown my ward, and I pledge you my faith that Raimond de Beaufoy has as long a memory for an obligation as for an injury. Could a man who has to hold his own with the world say more? But now the time has come to relieve you of your charge, and that you may have no fear for her safety, I have a score of men without who know no other law than that I give them. To be frank, Madame, I have promised Denise in marriage to my friend Messire Henri de Beaucaire, and where Beaufoy gives his friendship, no woman need shrink from giving her trust.’

‘But’—and the Abbess drew Denise towards her, a slender slip of a girl, dressed in the plainest white, and her hair drawn back from her pale face in a simple knot—‘Denise is but a child.’

‘My Lord Bishop differs, Madame,’ answered Beaufoy gravely. ‘And she who is woman enough for Martin de Chapny is woman enough for Henri de Beaucaire.’

‘I am here,’ cried De Chapny, ‘by grace of Monseigneur de Grandfrai, and——’

‘La, la, la!’ broke in the Seigneur. ‘May Monseigneur de Grandfrai teach you better manners; though, if he fails in that duty, never fear, there are others to take his place! This is no affair of yours, Messire, saving as cat’s-paw to Grandfrai’s monkey.’

‘But it is of mine, Raimond de Beaufoy’—and Bishop Theodore confronted the Seigneur. ‘Denise de Vaucourt is ward to Grandfrai by right and privilege of the Church. What? Because you mouth and bully, shall I play traitor to my trust? No, not for fifty Beaufoys, with fifty score church plunderers at their back! Listen——’

‘No, rather listen thou!’ cried Beaufoy. ‘Must I lose my toil because it suits your crooked politics to filch my labour on a trumped pretence? Denise is Beaufoy’s by right of lives set in the balance and eighteen years of struggle. And here, before you all, and in the face of God, I swear——’

‘Swear not at all, Raimond de Beaufoy, lest,

in reply, instead of calling God to witness, I call Him to curse.'

'Curse on,' cried Beaufoy, gripping round for his sword, 'but have Denise I shall! De Beaucaire, Marmontel, come; they are but a pack of monks!'

'Men as well as monks!' cried back the Bishop, and at a sign the brethren gathered round the Abbess, confronting Beaufoy with uplifted crucifixes.

'Tush!' said the Seigneur, ramming home his half-drawn blade. 'Said I not that a man could no more strike a monk than a woman? For peace' sake, I will humour the girl. Hearken, Denise. I was your mother's friend, and in the day of her need all that man could do to save her I did. You, at least, I saved. Vaucourt I have tended, nursed, nourished, and, so far as lay within me, I have played the father. Remember this, and tell me, is it your wish to marry Martin de Chapny?'

And out of the great silence that followed, Denise, never lifting her head from the Mother's breast, answered in a whisper, 'No.'

'Good!' cried De Beaufoy. 'If you owed me a debt, Denise, you have paid in full. Are you answered, Monseigneur?'

'Hearken, Denise,' said Theodore of Grand-



" 'Keep me, Mother, and hold me fast.' "

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frai in his turn. 'For eighteen years the Church has guarded, sheltered, taught, and loved you. In your sorrows you have been comforted ; in your troubles you have been soothed ; in your doubts you have been guided. The love of God has been brought near to you. Motherless, you have lacked no mother ; fatherless, you have lacked no father. Remember this, and tell me, Denise—is it your will to marry Henri de Beaucaire ?'

And again, holding the Mother the closer, Denise answered, 'No.'

For a moment there was a silence, and it was the girl who broke it.

'Keep me, Mother, and hold me fast. If I am but worthy, let me be as you are, the bride of the Lord Christ and of none else.'

Again there was a silence, such a silence as when men feel that the Eternal is very near, and this time it was Beaufoy who broke it.

'So be it,' he said solemnly. 'Let us leave bickering, we two. Thou and I must stand aside, Bishop, for here is a greater than us both.'

III

BEAUFOY'S VENGEANCE

WHEN the men of Angoumois spoke of the vengeance of Beaufoy, which they did for three generations, they had in their thought a certain late August day in 1467, the year that saw that gamecock among princes, Charles the Bold, buckle on his spurs. And if, in that vengeance, the Seigneur forgot mercy in judgment there is this in his excuse : that he dealt with those who showed no mercy. Further, if the chief end of judgment is to deter evil-doers, then had there never been before so shrewd a stroke of justice, since for hard on a score of years thereafter the Suzerainty had peace from reivers, forest thieves, and masterless men. Yet, for all this, the vengeance was unbecoming a Christian man, though it was characteristic of Raimond de Beaufoy that because he struck for another he struck hard, for it was not Beaufoy that he avenged, but Theodore, Bishop of Grandfrai. This was how it came about.

As, hard upon seven years before, they two had ridden out from the Convent of Our Lady of Good Hope, as has been already told, the Seigneur was half content and half wrathful. He had lost his point, but so had my Lord Bishop, and they were therefore quits. Now, to hold himself no better than his neighbour was a new thing to Beaufoy, and set him thinking; so that at last, out of the fulness of his heart, he spoke.

‘I owe you no grudge for this day’s worsting,’ said he. ‘At best ’tis a stalemate, and none can cry “Check” to the other. The wisdom of it to me is this: that you have need of me for this world, Bishop, and I of you for the next. Let us join hands, and so both be the stronger. Who touches Grandfrai touches Beaufoy, and Beaufoy will see to it; and thou on thy part hast thy prayers, thy masses—eh? Is it a bargain?’

Theodore of Grandfrai turned in his saddle and looked down the long line of Beaufoy’s men.

‘I understand well enough,’ said he, still looking hard behind, ‘but I think the heavy end of the stick lies with me.’

‘By St. Francis, not so!’ cried the Seigneur. ‘Heard you ever that Beaufoy had wronged

woman or weakling, sold justice for a bribe, broke the plight of his oath, set self before sacrifice, lived sleek on another's sweat, swined himself with wine, or worked another's downfall by false craft? No saint am I, Monseigneur, to my shame and sorrow, but no sinner beyond Christ's mercy. Besides, a five-year-old boy makes for virtue in his father. Is it a bargain?

'Raimond de Beaufoy is Raimond de Beaufoy,' answered the Bishop. 'But what of two score of the earth's dross?'

'Leave them to me to keep clean by the fear of man if not of God. Is it a bargain, I say?'

And Theodore answered:

'A bargain, Seigneur; and for life?'

Whereat Beaufoy rubbed his chin.

'Why, no, Monseigneur; that were as bad as if a man took to himself a second wife, and one is enough for me. A life's a long arm's-length. Say seven years.'

'And then,' said the Bishop slyly, 'the year of release!'

'The year of release,' echoed Beaufoy gravely, not understanding a jot of the reference. 'A good phrase, and mayhap an apt one.'

'And will the pact include the Convent of Our Lady?'

‘The Convent of Our Lady holds Denise de Vaucourt,’ answered Beaufoy sternly, ‘and say what you will, she is Beaufoy’s ward. Woe to him, gentle or simple, who touches Our Lady of Good Hope while Denise de Vaucourt lives!’

‘Between us two, then, Seigneur?’

‘Between us two, Bishop. There is my hand upon it, and if I fail to hold to my pledge, may the Lord show me no mercy in my time of need.’

And so the compact was made. That, as has been said, was seven years past, and now, with no more than the last few sands of the time to run, Raimond de Beaufoy had roused the Seigneurie that he might keep faith. Thrice before he had done this, but thrice only in two-and-thirty years. Once after the Vaucourt massacre, to beat the woods for men as a hunter might for wolves and foxes; once when he led fifty trained men and four times that of villains to aid, at his own cost, in the crushing of Talbot at Castillon; and once, as shall be told, when the King came to Beaufoy.

For the repressing of sudden turbulence, the enforcings of his powers of justice or right as Seigneur, Beaufoy’s paid men were commonly sufficient. But this was no common case, and

so he had roused the Seigneurie, and marched on Grandfrai with five-score men at his back.

‘This,’ said Beaufoy to Marmontel, his squire, who rode by his side, ‘comes of living over-little for this world and over-much for the next. A man while he has his feet on earth should keep some of his wits there too. Here is Theodore of Grandfrai, as gracious and kindly a man as ever said “No!” out of a stern conscience, and yet he must need set his vassals by the ears, as if they were not flesh and blood because they were chattels of the Church. Pray God they have not got his palace tore down about him before we succour him.’

‘But by your leave, Seigneur,’ said Marmontel—it was Marmontel the younger, and own son of his father in devotion to Beaufoy—‘if Flemish Peter told truth, these are the very scum of the woods. Broken men from east and west, camp-followers from the wars round Paris, freelances, rogues, thieves, and worse. How then——’

‘The nearer the devil the greater need of the Church’—and the Seigneur laughed. ‘Would you have my Lord Bishop fret and harry gray-frocked monks? But he missed his mission. Stocks, pillories, and brandings stand in poor stead of the love of God, and yet I do not blame

Theodore of Grandfrai, but rather that thin-faced Spaniard that sits in his ear. May the Lord love Beaufoy better than to leave its Seigneur to play the fool to its undoing in his old age! See what comes of it. There was Grandfrai, a father in Angoumois these twenty years. If he spoke a blunt word now and then, it was all in kindness; and what man had the better right than he who fed the hungry, soothed the sorrowing, assoilzied the dying, and loved all, the small and the great, with an equal love, and never to his own gain? That he clung to his rights like a dog to a bone was naught to his disparagement: a man should be a man, and no boneless jellyfish. Then comes this Salamanca Prior, and in a twinkle white's black. A year ago these rogues, scum as they are, would have throttled the viler rogue who cursed Grandfrai; now they have passed beyond curses and come to works.'

'And we,' said Marmontel sourly, 'must dance till our bones ache to the music set blaring by this same lean bigot.'

'No, by St. Francis, no!' cried the Seigneur; 'but rather you must uphold Beaufoy's pledged word, and that you shall do, were it passed to the devil himself.'

Grandfrai, for all its bishopric, was no more

than a straggling village on the highroad from Ruffec to Nortron, and lay beyond the boundary of Beaufoy's Suzerainty ; and, saving for his compact, the quarrel was no more his than that of Blaise la Valette, Gaspard St. Claud, or the Count de Confolens. But of these the first was in his dotage, the second at Paris with Louis, and no mortal ever knew the third care for aught save the filling of his stomach with meat and drink. On Beaufoy, then, fell the burden of law and order, and as they rode into Grand-frai it was plain there was no light weight to be borne.

Not a house but was mishandled—the doors driven in, the thatch a-smouldering, the patches of vineyard and melons broken down or trampled into ruin, and the paths strewn with the wrecked litter of the poor furnishings. Nor had their owners escaped. Sorrowful lamentations were matched with still more sorrowful silences, and the bitterest fruit of war had been plucked and scattered in the lavish waste of an abundant harvest.

Half Grandfrai lay dead in its spoiled gardens. Here a huddle of woman's clothes ; there a sodden lump choking the trickling flow of the kennel ; further on a graybeard peasant prone across his threshold, half within and half with-

out, and who had died on his knees as he fell ; groups of twos and threes that in desperation had turned bare-handed on their murderers ; but everywhere, to right and left, desolation and death. But neither fire nor slaughter checked the Seigneur, until, midway up the straggle of the village, he halted to question a woman sitting in the road with a babe on her lap. She was the first living thing he had seen in Grandfrai.

‘What of Monseigneur the Bishop?’ he cried, leaning across his horse’s neck.

She looked up at him dully, then back to the babe, shaking her head. Gathering her burden into her left arm, she fumbled at the bosom of her dress, opening it, and setting to her breast the mouth of the child. As she did so, a trickle of blood came from the lips that should have sucked ; and again she looked up, silent but whimpering, and her mouth all a-tremble.

‘Damnation !’ said the Seigneur softly between his teeth ; and sitting back in his saddle, he drove his spurs hard home. ‘Ride on, men !’ he said, and galloped forward, nor paused again until they turned into the square where stood the palace, with its ugly, squat, low-roofed church across the angle.

From end to end the place was empty, but

there were those scattered on the shallow flight of steps leading up to the church-doors to show that life had been. In ones and twos they lay as they had fallen, but chiefly to the sides, as if they had been caught and cut down in a frantic rush for shelter—women, for the most part, drawn by the service, for the day was the day of St. John Baptist.

At the sound of the hoof-beats in the square there came a stir from the church. White, scared faces looked out of the black vault of the open door, across which there hung the tattered remnants of a heavy curtain, and of a sudden there was a thin babble of lamentation. The terror-bound tongues were unloosed, and wrath and sorrow found voice; no form of words, no coherency, only a shrill, murmuring clamour as of Rachel weeping for her children and beyond all comfort.

Leaping down, his face white under its bronze, Beaufoy mounted the steps, Marmontel and a dozen others hard behind. In the sharp fury of battle he had sent more than one man to his death, and thought naught of it either then or afterward; but this callous slaughter, as of sheep, this dry-voiced wailing, half fear, half loss, moved him as never had stricken field.

At the door of the church he paused in a rare uncertainty.

‘Where is Monseigneur? Have they dared mishandle him like—like’—and he looked with a gesture down the steps—‘like these others?’

It was a woman who answered, an old witch-wife, shrunk and wizened with age.

‘Come and see,’ said she, and gripped him by the arm.

She had seen too much that day to have terror of the living, though he were Seigneur, Suzerain, or King. When one has rubbed elbows with death for a full hour, there is little left in life to fear. A day before it might have cost her her right hand to have so much as touched the Seigneur; now, calamity had drawn together class and class, and she gripped him as if he were but flesh and blood like herself.

‘Come and see.’

She led him in, the now silent troop of peasants shuffling at their heels. The church was in utter darkness, except for one twinkling lamp hung high up against the roof—so high that it had escaped the destruction measured out to every altar and in every side-chapel; but so thick was the gloom—for the church was built against blind walls to north and south—and so thin and remote the light, that all the

further end, where was the great altar, and behind the pillars, was black as night.

Ten steps from the door, and Beaufoy—the woman still clinging to him—paused, that his eyes might grow accustomed to the gloom, and in behind him gathered the small remnant of the people of Grandfrai, dumb, or whispering shrilly under their breath, and staring hard at the Seigneur. The strength of the church—their trust for so many years—was broken; but here was a new and rougher power, and dimly, half unconsciously, their trust went out to him.

Slowly the darkness gave up its secrets. First, the loom of the wide pillars, with rough, unusual, sprawling patches at their feet, with here and there a blotch of gray that, as their eyes found power, lightened into a dead face; then the uncertain stretch of walls, broken by niches or small votive chapels; and lastly, slowly—very slowly—the far-off chancel-stalls and the dim brown depths of the choir.

After that the tale of ruin told itself without words: altar-pieces shredded from their frames, splintered crucifixes upholding maimed Christs, statues laid in shivers. The very railings of the altar had been torn from their place and used to batter down the shrines. Not a marble

stood upon its base ; not a candlestick but was crushed and twisted ; not a vestment but was rent to rags and rolled in the blood of that day's martyrdom.

' See !'—and the woman turned her wrinkled face up to Beaufoy, shaking his arm as she spoke—' see, they were worse than devils ! Not Satan himself would dare touch holy things.'

' But Monseigneur,' cried Beaufoy, speaking in his impatience and dread as men were not wont to speak in such a place—' where is Monseigneur ?'

' Come and see,' said the woman a second time.

With the assured step of one who knows every tile in the worn pavement, she urged the Seigneur forward ; then, of a sudden, when a dozen feet from the shattered railing that had shut apart the chancel, she dropped his arm and ran forward alone. At the altar steps she paused, and falling on her knees called to him in a hoarse whisper :

' See, Seigneur, see ! Were they not worse than devils ?'

There, on the third step, was Theodore of Grandfrai, done to death in the very ministry of the service. That he had turned to meet

these breakers of sanctuary was clear, for his wounds were all in front, as those of a warrior should be, and to the last Theodore of Grand-frai had been a true soldier of the Cross. That he had died denouncing sin and defending his flock was probable, for behind him was a shambles, and his wounds were many and deep. But whatever of wrath there had been was gone, and he lay as if asleep. His eyes were closed, his arms drawn decently to his side, and on his breast lay a rude crucifix carved from some common wood.

‘God give us all as sweet a rest,’ said Beaufoy, turning to those about him. ‘Which way went these slayers of priests?’

As he spoke there was a hum and a buzz across the church. They loved their Bishop, these poor souls, and the Seigneur’s pity was dear to them; but for the moment they loved vengeance better. At once a dozen voices broke out, and in the dim light there were wild and passionate gestures.

‘Westward, Seigneur, westward; and there are none so many of them, no more than two score.’

‘Two score! And they sacked Grand-frai?’

‘Two score devils,’ answered the woman,

‘and they took us by surprise. My son Jean they piked as——’

‘Ay, I can guess the tale. Let it rest, mother.’

Down on his knees he went, and lifting up the crucifix, he kissed it before them all and held it aloft.

‘I was too late, Lord God—too late to save him! And though he might say, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge,” so say not I.’

Then he kissed the cross a second time, and laid it back whence he had taken it.

‘Let Beaufoy’s men follow me,’ he said, rising. ‘The rest bide here and right this disorder as best they can.’

At the door he turned, and thrusting aside the tattered curtain, looked back into the gloom.

‘Listen!’ he said, ‘and I pray God the dead can hear it also. Until justice be done, I swear by the honour of Beaufoy that I will not cross the door of my house—no, not though the vengeance be seven years in the coming’—and, at the words, from behind him there came a shout that grew and swelled into a roar.

Beaufoy’s men were as hot in the blood as Beaufoy’s lord.

‘If it were into hell’s mouth,’ said Marmontel as they rode at a sharp trot out into the

pastures, 'they would follow you unwinking, their gall is so stirred. Seigneur, you never heard the like of the poor folks' tales : they were a shame to Christendom, and the Lord have mercy on the Spanish Prior !'

'By St. Francis,' cried Beaufoy, 'I had forgotten the Prior ! What of him ?'

'They have him fast ; and if we do not catch them up by nightfall——'

'We must, we shall !'—and Beaufoy smote his thigh with his clenched fist. 'Their spoil of beasts hinders them, and, besides, they are drunk with slaughter, and so have no fear. Be content, Marmontel ; we shall catch them.'

'And then, Seigneur ?'

Raimond de Beaufoy's face grew ugly in its grim hardness. 'Wait,' he said, 'wait,' and said no more ; but the words were fuller of meaning than a curse.

Yet at this time the Seigneur had no plan. How or where he should lay hands on them, or how deal with the wretches he knew not, and what happened afterwards happened in a sense of chance.

'There are some two or three on horseback, Seigneur,' went on Marmontel ; 'part of the loot of Grandfrai.'

'On horseback, eh ?' And Beaufoy laughed

dourly. 'Set a beggar on horseback, and where does he ride? On my word, they are like to learn shortly whether or no the proverb holds. Faster, men, faster!'

To track two-score reivers with a mixed multitude of cattle, sheep, and goats was no hard matter. The broken undergrowth and trampled grass left no room for question. Apparently they had been in no haste, for at intervals the belt of trodden herbage broadened out that the beasts might rest and crop the grass, green enough under the trees, in spite of the parched dryness of the long summer. What need had they for haste? Grandfrai was palsied, and they guessed nought of the urgent message sent to Beaufoy.

The Seigneur's troop had held their course for little more than an hour, when Marmontel, who rode by his master, half checked his horse and pointed ahead. Between the distant tree-trunks, here more scattered than common, was a brown and dun dappling that twinkled in and out, now showing clear, now lost again.

'We have them, Seigneur, we have them! Ten minutes' gallop, and we're in touch.'

But Beaufoy threw up a warning hand, and reined back. They had ridden far, and their beasts were fagged; now that they held their

prey, as it were in a leash, there was no need for haste. So for half an hour the hunters and the unconscious quarry kept an even pace. So near were they that at times laughter or a snatch of song came down the wind, but never once did those before look back. Then there befell a kind of chance. A horse of the troop of those ahead whinnied, and one of Beaufoy's answered, and on the moment the Seigneur struck home his spurs.

‘The hunt’s afoot!’ he cried. ‘Forward men, and leave mercy to God Almighty!’

With a shout they broke into a gallop, sweeping like shadows between the tree-trunks, and with an answering shout, half terror, half rage, the men in front woke into life. There was an instant’s confusion; then, like men used to the worst emergencies and trained to prompt action, they dashed on, abandoning their booty without a thought to fight for it. Rogues in grain, they could thief or murder, but had little stomach for battle.

To Beaufoy’s joy they held together. Had they scattered, his vengeance would have been as slow to win as to eat a pomegranate seed by seed; and as he saw them driving ahead in a bunch, he blessed St. Francis in his heart. In the centre of the flying group was a bound man

—the Salamancan Prior, no doubt, and he hindered them.

‘See!’ said the Seigneur to Marmontel, a grim laugh on his face, ‘vengeance is ever sweeter than spoils, and the rascals will risk hanging for their small hope of revenge. There they go to the left like a drove of scared sheep. Was the straight course not good enough for them? By the saints! I have it. They are in full cry for the Cave of the Wolves, and may slip our fingers yet. There is an outlet on the south. Round with you, Marmontel, and five with you! The exit there is narrow, no more than the squeeze of a horse. Block it up, and we have them in a trap. Ride, man, ride! there are rocks in plenty. Oh, St. Francis, my patron, I thank thee from my soul—I thank thee from my soul! Ask what thou wilt of me, and by the Lord whose man I am, I will give it thee—ay, to the whole of Beaufoy!’

In his deep, wolfish gladness the Seigneur’s heart was in his cry, but there is no record that he was ever the poorer for his oath, mayhap because St. Francis was sworn to poverty.

Away to the left sped Marmontel with half a dozen at his beast’s heels, each urging his horse to the utmost speed. The distance was not great, but the ground was on an upward

slope, and if they were to stop the second hole of the burrow, they had need to make haste. Stop it they did, rolling down into the narrow gap heavy boulders and cruel pointed rocks, so that neither horse nor man could force a way through, and so that end of the cave comes no more into the tale.

But while Marmontel rode fast, Beaufoy checked his men. Now that he saw their goal, he had no mind to balk them. He would have them pent as in the hollow of his hand, whereas to have blundered into their midst would have been to lose some of them in the scattering. Therefore he checked the pursuit, and let them break out of the wood and into the cave's mouth unmolested. As he sat waiting and rubbing his chin, his eye caught the dull glare of the charcoal furnaces spread through the great stretch of beech-trees, and a thought struck him.

'I shall try it! By St. Francis, I shall try it!' he cried. 'The pity is for the beasts; as for the men, 'tis their due and no more. Listen!' and he beckoned to Flemish Peter to come near. 'Back, thou, to Grandfrai, and search out a dozen or a score of horses; never fear but there are some hidden away. Clap on their backs as many of Beaufoy's men as they can

carry, two or three apiece, if need be—the louts can hold one another in place—and let them bring every man a shovel and a mattock. Hunt through the palace of my Lord Bishop and pick me out a dozen or more of sheets or blankets, as broad and as long as thou canst find, and be not too nice in choosing, since those we saw in the church are done with such things. Bring these, thou, and bid them send wine and meat after us. Then ride here every man of you, and waste no time, though your beasts drop.'

Then, the quarry having gone to earth, he roused up his horse and pushed on.

The cave opened from a narrow cleft in the flat face of naked rock, the mouth being set some thirty yards back at the head of a roofless path, with a double turn approaching in shape to a rude S, so that those without were hidden from those within. Facing this wall of rock was a sun-dried, semicircular plateau, stretching back a half furlong to the outlying timber that fringed the forest; a plateau that had been a luxuriant greenness while the spring rains endured, but which was now a barren wilderness of sere and crisped herbage.

Across this rode Beaufoy, boldly pushing between the lines of rock, and only drew rein

when in full sight of the cave's mouth. As he had reckoned, it was empty, those within having made all haste to escape by the upper end, only to find Marmontel forehanded with them.

‘Off and unsaddle!’ cried Beaufoy. ‘Here we camp for to-night, at least. When they come racketing back, as they will presently, let them find a fire to welcome them. A dozen of us in sight will do, and some of you tether the beasts back in the woods for coolness.’

The story of how the trapped wretches, hearing the rattle of the rocks rolled into the cramped narrowness of the upper outlet, rounded in their tracks and made pell-mell for the entrance, only to find a camp-fire crackling in their path; and how they turned back to the inner blackness cursing their folly, may go untold. So, too, the story of the weary and yet unwearied vigilance of Beaufoy's men, who all night long watched by the roaring blaze, sleepless and singing—for never once from midnight onward did they cease the chant the Seigneur had bid them strike up, to muffle that ring of mattock and shovel being plied in the open outside the rocks.

It was at midnight that Beaufoy's men came straggling in from Grandfrai in twos and threes, and found their labour waiting them.

‘ See !—and the Seigneur pointed out in the moonlight two lines of little sticks ten feet apart, and drawn from rock to rock in a curve, so as to enclose the entrance of the cave. ‘ Draw me a trench between these lines. First skin the surface some two inches deep, and lay aside the dry sods ; then let the sides sink as if by a plummet. Spread out these cloths to the outer edge of the curve, and fill the stuff into them. One-third dig, one-third empty the cloths into the wood yonder, and one-third rest. Change shifts every hour. The ground is sandy and easy to work, but with enough of clay to bind the sand. Remember what you saw this day in Grandfrai, and work. Or, if you will not work for the honour of Beaufoy and the glory of God, work for the five crowns wherewith every man of you may drink himself drunk for seven days hereafter. Or, if not for that, then, by St. Francis, work for your skin’s sake ; for, by the faith of Beaufoy, the man who lags had better have died this day at Grandfrai ! Do you hear, dogs ? Work, I say, work !’

So on through the changing shadows of the night, on into the dawn and breadth of the young day there was no pause in the stroke of mattock or swing of shovels, and by the time the sun was above the beech-trees Beaufoy had

his will in a huge black trench, ten feet across and as many deep, that yawned in a great bow from cliff to cliff, its sides as smooth and straight as if set by stone and cord. Only at either end was there a path a foot wide, and battened up to keep it from falling in.

‘Good,’ said the Seigneur. ‘Go and rest, my children; you have done well. Now, Marmontel, seek me out of the woods straight saplings and lay them across, two yards apart and as many inches below the surface, while I talk to our friends of the charcoal furnaces.’

A long furlong off, where the beech forest thickened, were the huts of the charcoal-burners and their furnaces; the first, rude temporary booths, bough-thatched, to give some shelter from rain—need of warmth there was none. The second, conical sod-coated heaps built about piled faggots, with here and there vents that glowed ruddily by night, even when the sluggish smoke was thickest. Between the huts were great stacks of new-made charcoal, ready for the first buyer’s winter store of fuel. The men themselves were sturdy and strong built, more than one having the muscles of a Hercules under the grime of a Vulcan.

At first they had crowded forward to see the unwonted sight of a score of fools digging a

hole to apparently no purpose ; but presently, with the apathy of men who have no room in life for a thought beyond meat and the toil that earns it, they returned to their work.

‘Sell me your labour for three days,’ said Beaufoy. ‘By that, I think, we shall see the end of the play. If not, we shall make an end. First spread me the bottom of that trench with dry brush. Let it bulk as big as you will—it will make the better heat, and in the burning it will go down to small compass. Then over that spread me a foot deep of sticks, from the thickness of a finger to the girth of a man’s arm. That done, we can wait. Let enough keep in the bend beyond the trench to check any thought of a rush. For twenty-four hours the rogues will sulk, then we shall see.’

So that day and the next night Beaufoy’s men, except for guarding the cave’s mouth, lay at ease, eating and drinking that which had been brought from Grandfrai. Only the men of the forest laboured, doing as they were ordered, and laying the wood ready for burning with the cunning that comes of a life’s toil. The next day they, too, lay at ease, or frolicked like schoolboys in the cool shade, and but one thing happened.

The shadows had but just turned to the east

when a fellow bearing a white rag upon a stick showed face at the cave's mouth, and asked for a parley.

'Parley from where you are ; you and I have no secrets,' said Beaufoy. 'But if you want terms, I tell you flat I have no terms to offer. If you ask "Why?" let Grandfrai Church answer you. Now, then, parley.'

'We have a hostage,' he began.

'Ay,' broke in Beaufoy, 'my Lord Prior, and I will trade three of you for him. But let the three be taken by lot. No chicane whereby the major scoundrel saves his neck, and the minor scoundrel goes hang. Three taken by lot, or none, and none for choice.'

'But the hostage is ours,' said the fellow, 'and so it is ours to cry out the terms.'

'Chut !' answered Beaufoy, 'tis you who are ours, every man jack of you, and it is mine to cry the terms.'

'But see, Monseigneur'—and in his eagerness the fellow would have come on but that Beaufoy waved him back—'we are desperate men, and we can so maltreat——'

'Chut !' Beaufoy broke in a second time, 'am I a man to be frightened by another man's pains ? Three, by lot, or none, and get you back to your brother rogues and tell them so.'

Later on the Seigneur was sorely blamed that he had not saved the Spaniard at any price, but he held himself acquitted.

‘What? Let loose these devils on Angoumois for the sake of a man who had no more of the true love of God in him, for all his priorship, than the very wretches who held him so hard? No, by St. Francis, a thousand times no! If he were a good Christian, he died a martyr; if he were not, why should I balk justice for his sake?’

That night and the next day they were still cat and mouse, neither stirring. Then, when it was gone noon, Beaufoy bid the woodmen set the brush afire, and when it was well ablaze and flaring up to the very lip of the trench, he called for charcoal.

‘Bring,’ said he, ‘as many stacks as will spread a layer above the faggots two feet deep. Set the cost down to Beaufoy, and have no fear for the credit. Presently that will sink to a foot and a half of red ash that will hold its glow and grilling heat for a week if need be. But, if I guess aright, there will be no such need.’

By nightfall what the Seigneur had said had come to pass. The trench-bottom was a sullen furious red that winked, and darkened, and

glowed with every breath that blew across it. It was as if they had spread so much living lava drawn fresh from the heart of a volcano, and the wrath of the heat was as fiery as it was breathless.

‘Now,’ said Beaufoy, ‘a sprinkling of light brush to make a covering and keep in the wickedness of the fire and yet mask its heat. That will give it a skin of gray ash, but so light that it will fly at a puff. Take, then, these cloths and stretch them over the charred saplings, fixing them with pegs tightly to the pit’s mouth. That done, bring the sods and spread them where they grew. No need to be over-nice, a scattering of leaves will make all good, and but add fuel to fire.’

‘But, Seigneur,’ said Marmontel, ‘they have horse.’

‘Not so, man!’—and Beaufoy laughed. ‘Do you think they have starved these three days? My word for it, they have no horse. My word for it, too, they will make their venture to-night when I withdraw the guard. For, look you, the longer they wait the weaker they grow; and there is not a man of them yonder but would barter all the booty of Grandfrai for a draught of water. Ay, it will be to-night; and yet again my word for it they will make their

dash all together, lest if they go in twos and threes they be all cut down, whereas in the bursting out of a score some half may break through and escape. Thou hast stout arms, Marmontel, but thy wit is fat.'

That night Beaufoy withdrew his men by the narrow paths left along the face of the rock, and, hidden in the wood, set himself to watch, nor had his men need of orders to bid them stand sentinel. Not a soul of them all slept.

The sky was clear, except for a rare drift of cloud, and if the moon set early, there were stars enough to show the bend and tremor of the grass as the rising wind swept round the face of the cliff, and enough, too, to show a solitary blur that suddenly grew black against the gray of the stone. The men of the cave were awake, and in an instant the lethargy that comes of long watching was flung off.

'See! said I not right?'—and Beaufoy gripped Marmontel hard by the shoulder. 'One, two, three, four—there must be a dozen or more of them! And yon gray shadow is the Spanish Prior. May the Lord have mercy upon him! Look! They are thicker now—a score maybe, and, faith of Beaufoy, the rest are not far behind! They know there is a trap; that is a thing of course · but where is it? and

what? Ay, ay, that's the rub. Besides, they have no choice ; it's rush or starve. See, now they are in line! Their plans are as plain as noon—to make a burst on all sides at once. Let them do it, and, by St. Francis, we have them, every man! Pray the saints some blundering fool creep not too far out and mar the plan! No, no, they are off, Marmontel—they are off! Three strides, and—ah! My God! my God!

For an instant there was a rustle of grass as the many feet trampled its dryness, then the black line wavered, tottered, and went down in a red glare that shot across the night like a sudden angry dawn, a glare that shook and flickered and darkened in the tossing of many shadows, till swallowed up in a live flame as the dry grass of the sods caught fire and flared up with a roar overborne by a cry so fierce and so terrible that those who heard it stopped their ears, and, still staring, fell upon their knees.

‘May the Lord have mercy upon me if I wrongly took His vengeance into my own hands,’ said Beaufoy afterwards; ‘but let no man judge me who has not seen the sorrows of a Grandfrai.’

IV

HOW OUR LADY OF SUCCOUR CAME TO BEAUFOY

WHEN English Talbot landed at Bordeaux in '51, France was stirred even to far-off Paris ; and when the pocket-ridden patriotism of Guienne shouted a welcome to the buyers of its wines, France woke from the folly of placid contentment, and, for the fiftieth time in the century, made ready for war. With the feeble skirmishes and feints of battle in the south this history has nothing to do, nor with the part played in them by Raimond de Beaufoy. He bore his share of danger and privation as was his wont, and if the winter was frittered away in little better than gasconades, it was none of his fault. The story is rather of his homecoming in the summer of '52, and of the foe he found encamped within the four corners of the Suzerainty. If any man doubts that he and his did their duty against the Englishmen, let

him find his answer in this : whereas they rode out a full score, they came home but fifteen, and scarcely one of them a whole man.

As they rode north they travelled by way of Vaucourt—a kind of temporary appanage to Beaufoy because of Denise de Vaucourt's minority—and Marmontel would have had his Seigneur halt and rest.

'It is but five hours to nightfall,' he urged, 'and with the moon in its last quarter, the woods will be as black as a burnt-out charcoal-furnace. Let us bide, Seigneur, and push on to-morrow.'

But Beaufoy would have none of the suggestion. Since he had lost a wife at Vaucourt he had hated the gray old pile, with its sinister reminders of fire and sack still smirching its face—hated it, be it understood, less for the loss of the wife than for the wound to his vanity. Wives were to be had for the asking ; but to fling his handkerchief and see the girl catch another man's in place of his had galled him, and thenceforward, so far as women went, he had played the cynic, pretending there was neither virtue nor faith in their whole generation.

'Ride on,' he answered the squire curtly. 'Five hours will take us three parts through



“ ‘ Vaucourt has over many ghosts to please my taste.’ ”

the woods, and, at the worst, we can shelter at Lervins. Vaucourt has over-many ghosts to please my taste. Why, man'—and, turning in his saddle the better to scan the castle, he half drew his rein as he spoke—'those upper rooms are alive with owls, bats, and the Lord knows what vermin.'

'Better the vermin of Vaucourt than the vermin of Lervins,' said Marmontel bluntly; 'and as for ghosts, I reckon the living are more to be feared than the dead. Lervins had no good repute a twelvemonth back. What will it be after a year's rioting, and the Seigneur absent?'

'What! are you coward?'

'Faith, Seigneur, I never knew a man hurt by an honest love for a whole skin, and it's late in the day for us two to call coward to each other. Have your way; nevertheless, whoever sleeps at Lervins to-night, I will not.'

Thenceforward they rode up and down the slopes in silence, halting only once as the sun slipped behind the trees and the weary sultriness of the day slowly lifted; then, supper ended, the beasts washed down and lightly watered from a brook hard by, they again rode on, strength and vitality coming tingling back, with the growing freshness of the night.

In the thick shadows of the trees dusk fell swiftly, and the sun was no more than a hand's breadth below the rim of the world when the grayness shrivelled into gloom and the full dark was upon them. Could the squire have had his way, they would have camped there and then; but Beaufoy was obstinate, and pushed on. A foot's pace was their best speed, and no man trusted to his own skill in guidance. Had he done so, it had been to his cost, for he would have found timber within the first furlong. As it was, the gray loom of the bare trunks stole by them no further than an arm's length off.

Whether even their beasts' instinct was at fault, or the way longer than they had supposed, the shadows of morning had come and gone before the softening of the gloom ahead foretold a clearing, within which lay the handful of huts called Lervins. With the light Marmontel's scruples had vanished, and now he pushed on gaily. Lervins meant food, drink, and a stretching of cramped limbs, and a nest of cut-throats had no terrors for him under the honest sun.

Once inside the clearing, he slackened speed. Men have no liking for being caught napping, and a warning sometimes wins a welcome,

‘Hulloa!’ he shouted, his powerful voice echoing in the hollows of the wood, ‘Lervins, hulloa! hulloa! My faith! but they sleep like the dead!’ he went on to Flemish Peter, who rode on his flank. ‘There must have been better liquor flowing last night than goes to a goat-skin bottle. Come, both together—hulloa! hulloa!’

They might have spared their breath: Lervins was both deaf and dumb. Then, as they watched, wondering and a little afraid—for this was the charcoal season, when Lervins was wont to hum with rough life—a thing happened that made Marmontel jerk his beast back upon its haunches, and start up in his stirrup, gasping. Out from a doorway a long, lean gray head was thrust, and a starved wolf stole out into the sunlight, blinking, and at its heels there trotted a half-grown cub. For an instant it stood snarling, then the two slipped like shadows behind the house and were lost.

‘Saints! did you see that?’ cried the squire, flinging his arm out stiff before him. ‘Wolves couched at Lervins! I had sooner have seen the glint of English lance-heads than the white of their teeth. The place is a tomb.’

Driving his spurs home, he went forward at a gallop, hard pressed by Flemish Peter, with

the Seigneur and the rest following more leisurely. Of the prowlers of Lervins they had seen nothing, and Marmontel's actions had been to them those of a madman.

But for all his excitement and haste, he had a method with him. Once within twenty paces of the huts, he checked his beast and swung himself to the ground, stiffly enough, for years and leagues get the better of a man sorely ; then, hooking his reins across his arm, he went forward to the nearest doorway cautiously and with circumspection, since there might be a four-legged tenant within which his shout had left unaroused.

At the threshold Marmontel paused, peering, then he drew back, shading his eyes with his hand. The sun was already ablaze in the glade, and the glare dazzled him. A charcoal-burner's hut was but a squalid sight at the best—grimy, as became its owner's trade, and miserably poor because of the pittance that trade earned. That was of course. Therefore, it was neither the squalor nor the poverty that Marmontel's gaze sought for as the shadows took shape, but rather something which presently he found. Tenants there were, but let the world call as it might, they would pay no heed. Then, having found them, he slipped

the reins down to one hand, and beckoned with the other to Flemish Peter.

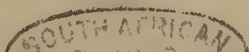
‘Look!’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘Is it murder?’ And Beaufoy rode up with his men to find the two staring silently and with intent faces into the black vault of the open doorway. Window there was none, and as the hut faced to the north no sunlight fell within.

What they saw was this: In the centre a rude table with a wooden settle at either side of it: beyond these, and along the further wall, a heavy layer of bracken and beaten straw was spread; on this three men were stretched, dead, and dead in an agony, for their limbs were crook’d and twisted as if in the worst extremity of mortal pain. In one corner stood a huge cooking-pot.

‘What fool’s comedy is this?’ cried Beaufoy from behind. ‘If there is aught inside, have it out that we may see it.’

‘We have seen it often enough, Seigneur,’ answered Marmontel with grim humour, but never turning his head as he spoke. ‘Often enough, but never quite like this. It is death; murder, I think.’

While the squire was speaking, Flemish Peter had dropped his reins—small chance of his beast breaking away after eighteen hours of



a march—and entered the hut. After the first suddenness of the shock another man's murder had no terrors for him.

‘Stand aside from the door,’ he said, as he went down on one knee in the bracken and bent over the nearest of the three; ‘the light is dim enough——’ He stopped short, as if the words were choked in his throat, and those without saw him bend lower, staring hard, then leap to his feet and run madly for the open air. ‘The plague! the plague!’ he cried, catching at his beast’s bridle. ‘The Lord have mercy on us all! The plague is in Beaufoy!’

Swinging himself into his saddle, he sat a moment breathless, and swaying like a drunken man, then with a cry of ‘The plague! the plague!’ he galloped hard for the woods, anywhere away from Lervins.

‘After the fool and have him back!’ called Beaufoy; ‘but thou, Marmontel, stay where thou art till we hear more of this thing, though God grant the fellow lied.’

Flemish Peter’s breakaway availed him little. In his terror he swerved to this side and that, holding no true course, and so inside of a furlong he was headed. A glance at his face gave, at least, evidence of his good faith, for no simulated terror could have aged him

ten years in fewer minutes. The bronze was wiped from his cheeks as breath is wiped from steel, and the hand that gripped the reins shook as with a palsy.

‘The place is accursed!’ he began, not waiting for Beaufoy to question him. ‘Let us begone while there is time, Seigneur, if indeed there is still time. Time! Saints forgive me, but I’m done with time. Three days to die in! Lord God, what’s three days to a man like me!’ And he fell to chattering.

‘Come, man, keep your wits in hand,’ cried Beaufoy sternly. ‘What wild talk is this of the plague, and how could the plague come to Lervins?’

‘Of whys and hows I know nought, Seigneur,’ answered the other doggedly, ‘but the plague it is. Who sees it once knows it twice.’

‘Is this certain, fellow?’

‘Certain?’ And in his contempt for the Seigneur’s doubt his voice settled down to firmness again. ‘Certain? Look at his neck and see! Why, he has that under his jaw.’ And Flemish Peter held up a huge clenched fist. ‘I know the marks, and a loathsome sight they are. For the Lord’s sake, let us begone!’

‘The plague here? Then may God help Beaufoy! Let us ride home, men.’

And so it came that the Seigneur found the enemy within his gates harder to fight than the foe without.

It was a dismal home-coming. Marmontel would have had him ride by the villages if for nothing else but to get news ; but Beaufoy was obstinate.

‘We shall get news soon enough,’ he said bitterly. ‘Whoever heard that evil tidings lagged on the road? There were we no more than fairly in the Seigneurie and the thing flies in our face. Ride home, man, and be in no haste to sup sorrow.’

So they skirted the towns, and shunned even the far-apart shepherds’ booths. Nay, they avoided the very peasants labouring in the fields, as if the Seigneur were a child that hid his head and said that there was no evil because he saw none. But to one and all there was a sullen tranquillity in the air, the hot, calm certainty of storm that comes before the thunder.

Once within sight of the castle walls, Marmontel plucked up spirit.

‘Shall I ride on, Seigneur, and bring them word that——’

‘Bide thou behind,’ answered Beaufoy curtly. ‘I will have no man schooling them to say this



“Beaufoy rode under the portcullis at the head of his troop.”

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or that. Let them tell the truth, and neither more nor less, though it be as bitter as worm-wood.'

So, as became his right, Beaufoy rode under the portcullis of the great gate at the head of his troop, and there was none to say nay or to give welcome. To all appearance the Château was as bereft of life as Lervins, a thing that roused the Seigneur's wrath and set his blood coursing.

'By St. Francis!' he swore between his teeth, 'plague or no plague, I will teach the knaves to keep better watch than this, though they keep it staggering!'

Even as he spoke a small side-door was pushed open, and a woman's face looked out, stared an instant and disappeared, and from within there arose a sudden clatter of life. Into the open courtyard they scrambled: maids, lackeys, and men-at-arms, and stood in a group under the shadow of the east tower, shamefaced, silent and expectant. Nor were their anticipations disappointed. Of the Seigneur's anger they knew something of old, but if they thought they had plumbed its depths and measured its strength, they learned their ignorance that first hour of his home-coming, and the fierceness of his stern wrath was their best medicine.

‘Now, begone to your work, every one of you,’ he said sharply, when his tongue had lashed them into life and spirit. ‘For this time I let the fault pass, but not twice. As for you’—and lowering his voice, he turned to the fifteen grouped closely behind him—‘not a word of Lervins. If they have tales to tell, listen and make light of them, but sift the truth. And do you, Marmontel, come to me in the justice-room after the night-watch is set. To leave the great gate gaping, the careless rogues! By St. Francis! if Talbot had marched this way, Beaufoy had been his for the asking.’

It was with a sour mood as companion that the Seigneur waited in the dusk the coming of Marmontel. Vexation was piled upon vexation. The pestilence was evil enough; but what for the moment touched him nearer, because it touched his pride, was the flatness of his home-coming. Here had he been away these months on the King’s business, and at their end to find nothing better than the cold welcome of a beggarly outcast! Was the spirit of Beaufoy wrecked because a dozen churls were dead of the plague? And as he asked himself the question, Marmontel came with the answer:

‘It is a pitiful business, Seigneur, a most

pitiful business. The poor folks are clean demented. You have seen the panic of a rout? Men flinging away arms, clothing, what-not, in their unreason, and fleeing they know not where, so long as it is but flight? That is Beaufoy. From the towns they crowd to the fields, and from the fields to the towns, and so contagion spreads. From east to west there is but one thought, one theme, one terror—the plague! the plague! They breed the sickness in themselves with their fears, and then die of despair. Turn their minds to other things, Seigneur, or Beaufoy is lost.'

'Ay, ay, I see, poor souls—I see. What shall it be now, Marmontel? A hunt?'

'By your leave, Seigneur,' answered the Squire, with a laugh that, clearer than a curse, told of his bitterness of soul. 'That you understand the leading of men, I grant; but, by your leave, I say you know little of the temper of men who wrestle three hopeless days with death, and then go down to the grave howling. To the grave? No, to bare earth—and rot. A hunt? As well say hang a score to cheer the rest! My faith! I think the score would thank you, for it would bring the end the sooner! No, no, Seigneur; they want a man among them to hearten them.'

‘A man?’ said Beaufoy. ‘What of the monks? Where are they?’

‘The monks are there, and are men, truly; since they fear like men and die like sheep with the murrain, and yet hold by their posts. Oh, ay, the monks are men; but it is not men they need, but a man. Go yourself, Seigneur.’

‘What! I? And the plague raging?’

‘Ay, Seigneur, you, and because the plague is raging. Who could hearten them like Raimond de Beaufoy? If that same rout was afoot, and you turned bare-fisted on the pursuit, is there a Beaufoy’s man that would not follow you back even to the pit’s-mouth? Not one!’

‘That,’ said Beaufoy, ‘would be but a man’s duty and a man’s risk, but this—— Let it rest for the moment. What of Mesnil, Montbrion, Charnex?’

‘The best hope is that rumour lies,’ answered Marmontel bluntly. ‘In their terror of solitude, the people have flocked to the towns. Who can blame them, poor souls? To fight the battle of death alone, and lose it alone, is fearful enough, without having the plague added. The towns, therefore, are packed. The monks do their best; but what avails a monk against panic? They say he but does his cloth’s duty, and no more. It is a man they need.’

‘And how,’ asked Beaufoy hesitatingly—‘how does it take them? I mean, how long? Come, man, you understand!’

Just what Marmontel answered need not be set down here. He told the truth, hiding nothing of the loathsomeness, of the sly cunning and lying in wait, of the sharp agony and swift suddenness of the collapse—all these he told, and in full clearness of detail. If the Seigneur faced the enemy, he should face him open-eyed.

‘But,’ he added, ‘worse than all that is the miserable inertness and the terror of anticipation. It is there they need a man to show them better things, and that to die like men—if so it must be—is better than some sort of living. Not one of themselves, nor a monk; but a man, Seigneur, a man.’

‘Ay, I know,’ answered Beaufoy, speaking like a man uncertain, and not looking the other in the face. ‘Let it rest till to-morrow. Then we shall see.’

But when the morrow came, he let it rest for that day, too, and contented himself with sending food and drink and cordials: the plague was the plague. Had it been a foe he could have warmed his blood against—English Talbot himself and his whole backing—he

could have cried 'Coward!' upon himself to have held back an hour; but a foe that, all unseen, slew by night or noonday, and filched the courage from a man as well as his life, that needed a thought.

On the second day Marmontel came to him again, and from the fire in his eyes it was plain that the squire was much stirred.

'A miracle, Seigneur, a miracle!' he cried. 'Our Lady of Succour has appeared at Mesnil. Michel Bische has run up with the news, panting.'

'Miracle? Our Lady of Succour? What fresh madness is this, Marmontel?'

'No madness, Seigneur, but God's truth,' urged the squire. 'Michel saw her go from house to house with his own eyes. 'Tis a miracle, I say, and the saving of Beaufoy.'

'Send the fool to me,' said Beaufoy sternly, 'and hold thou thy tongue meanwhile. Who am I, or what is Mesnil, that a miracle should come our way?'

But Michel Bische clung fast to his tale.

'It was an hour past, Seigneur, and except for a moan or a cry, all Mesnil was dumb in the heat. God keep us from such heat; it was like the blast of a baker's oven, and not so much as a dog was astir in it but myself. I

was in the middle of the path, Seigneur, as far as might be from the houses—there is less danger that way—when I heard the creak of a door behind, and looked back across my shoulder, so, and she was there; I swear it, she was there!’

‘Who, fool?’

‘Our Lady, Seigneur, Our Lady of Succour, and all in white, with the hood about her head, her robe across the shoulder, and the blue band of the Madonna, as she stands in the church at Granfrai.’

‘What next?’

‘I went down on my knees in the dust, Seigneur, and when I looked again she had crossed the road to Gil Troyes, where four lie dying and two dead. ’Tis the filthiest spot in Mesnil. Then I ran here as fast as feet could carry me.’

‘Did I not tell you, Seigneur?’ cried Marmontel. ‘Is it not truth?’

And for answer Beaufoy said curtly :

‘Go thou and get ready the horses. We will ride to Mesnil and see for ourselves.’

Neither then nor any time afterwards could Raimond de Beaufoy have said what was clearly in his mind. To him Beaufoy was the pivot of the world, and therefore, if such a

manifestation were to be given, there was no place more appropriate. But he was little tinged with what may be called the religiosity of the age, the wide-throated capacity for swallowing theological camels without a strain, and so looked askance at marvels. On the whole, he had that commonest of minds of any age—the lazy inertness that neither accepts nor rejects.

Only once he spoke, and even then it had nothing to do with Michel's tale. It was as they rode down the slope of the hill that overtops Mesnil.

'Who are these camped yonder beyond the river?'

And Marmontel, shading his eyes, shook his head.

'Strangers, Seigneur, but I know not who. There are five horses tethered there in the shade. Shall I push on and ask?'

'No, they can wait. This other presses more nearly.'

Mesnil they found as Michel Bische had described, silent and breathless. The dust was fetlock-deep, and at every beat of the hoof it rose in a fine cloud, hot, dry, and pungent, but to Beaufoy the muffled tread had a subtle sound of death. That death lay to right and left he

knew ; and as they halted midway along the one straggling street, he cursed his folly for having thrust himself into danger for a fool's tale. Nay, death lay even nearer than behind these scorched walls, whose radiated heat burnt out the vitality of the air. Three several places Beaufoy's folk lay where they had fallen on the roadway, and more than one of the dried-up gardens had a tenant whose sleep not even the fierceness of the sun could break. Life there was none ; except that once two gray-frocked brothers of St. Francis passed, staring hard to see the Seigneur de Beaufoy in such a place, but white and frightened, and with no sign about them of having seen a vision.

‘ Well, what next ? ’ Sick at heart and shaken in nerve, he turned sharply on Michel Bische, who all the way from Beaufoy had trotted sturdily at their heels. ‘ Where is this Gil Troyes ? ’

For answer Michel Bische went ahead slowly, and for all that Our Lady of Succour was present in Mesnil, the Seigneur noted that he rigidly held to the middle of the path. Michel Bische did not believe in tempting Providence. Fifty paces further on he stopped.

‘ There, Seigneur. ’

It was a plain, dingy house of weather-stained

wood, as was all Mesnil, the huge projecting eaves of the sharp-pitched roof giving it an overweighted clumsy, appearance. Five steps led up to the porch, from which there hung the withered shoots of some creeping plant.

‘Then, my friend, do thou hold these, and, Marmontel, do you come with me.’

Handing the reins to Bische, Beaufoy turned into the scorched garden that fronted Gil Troyes’ house, and for reasons best known to himself he made such haste that the squire had much ado to follow hard behind him. With his foot on the second of Gil Troyes’ five steps, the door opened, and, for all his haste, he stopped, staring at the vision set in the black cavity.

‘Saints!’ tis the Madonna herself!’ he heard Marmontel gasp; and looking back, he saw the squire on his knees on the path, bonnetless, and his eyes starting like a crab’s. As for Michel Bische, he had flung the reins to the winds and was face-flat in the dust, mumbling he knew not what incoherent prayers.

The door had opened inwards, and framed in the empty space was a woman, the spotless white of whose robe shone dazzling in the sun. From throat to instep there was but one line of colour to break the glistening purity, a belt of

palest blue binding the waist. Round the head was wound a white shawl, its end falling in a curve upon the shoulder.

For a full minute Beaufoy stood staring as hard as the squire, then he cried :

‘What? Mademoiselle de Salice here, and Mesnil no better than a pest-house? It is pure madness!’

To Bonne de Salice the meeting had been as unexpected as to the Seigneur, and as she looked down from her vantage-height upon the three men, her pale face flushed red in its setting of white draperies.

‘Oh, believe me—believe me, Seigneur de Beaufoy, I had no knowledge that you were home from the South. I would never have dared——’

‘What!’ cried Beaufoy, laughing as he had not laughed these three days; ‘am I a worse terror than the plague? You are frank, Mademoiselle Bonne.’ Then he remembered the sorrows of Beaufoy, and the jesting smile passed to a stern gravity. ‘This is no place for women!’ he said, mounting the steps as he spoke, ‘least of all for a frail woman delicately nurtured. How could I look my old comrade and friend, your father, in the face if—if—if aught happened?’

‘Then what is woman’s work, Seigneur de Beaufoy, if not to nurse the sick, comfort the sorrowful, and make smooth the rough places, whether they be of life or of death? There in the South you and my father took your lives in your hands a dozen times, I make no doubt. That was fighting France’s battles, and men would have called you “coward” had you hung back. Is a woman’s life so much more precious than a man’s that she must not fight France’s battles in her turn? I had cried shame upon myself had I hung back when Beaufoy was stricken, for is not Beaufoy part of France’s life’s blood? Only, only——’ And again she went red as a rose, and fell a-stammering. ‘I had no thought that you were in the Suzerainty, or I might have let you fight your own battles at home, like a brave man, as you would have fought them abroad.’

And whether it was the fire of the sun or the flush of shame, Beaufoy’s face went redder than her own when he remembered how he had held back from the danger which she had faced without a second thought.

‘But to face this place alone?’

‘No, no,’ she cried eagerly, ‘not alone. My people are camped beyond the river there, and my women with them. They—I do not judge

them, Seigneur—they were afraid, and he who fears is best away from the plague.'

'And you have no fear?'

'Why should I? God is as near at Mesnil as He is at Salice. There is loathing that one cannot help; but in the pity for the poor folks' agony and terror it is forgotten. Give them courage and you give them life.'

Which was Marmontel's theory; and in his heart Raimond de Beaufoy swore that if their Seigneur's presence could hearten-up the people of Mesnil, and so rout the enemy, heartened they would be, come what might of it.

Thenceforward they forgot they were man and woman, if, indeed, Bonne de Salice had ever remembered it, except in her first startled maidenliness. Night by night she retired to her tent under the trees beyond the river, while Beaufoy took his six hours' rest at the Château. In vain he had proposed to reverse the arrangements, seeing that she had her own women with her, and for her sake he would gladly have slept in the bare dust of Mesnil; but she was firm, and when he saw the thing troubled her, he left off urging. By day they worked together, Marmontel, the monks of Grandfrai, and a few others who were fired by their example helping them. Wooden pest-houses,

were hastily run up, rough and comfortless enough, but still places of isolation. Wholesome, well-cooked food was given, and such drugs as, out of their ignorance, the monks prescribed. But, chiefest of all, Bonne de Salice moved among the stricken folk with a gentle, calm assurance, as if there was neither death nor danger in all Beaufoy.

Nor were the ministrations confined to Mesnil. Montbrion, Charnex, and every village and hamlet had their turn, till at last the plague was stayed, and the day came when even Bonne de Salice thought it no sin to say, 'We may rest to-morrow.'

But with the morrow a change came to her and to Raimond de Beaufoy. The fellowship born of the days of heat and struggle was gone. Their minds had been so full of thought, their hearts so full of care, the crying needs of others had so possessed them, that there had been no room for self. But all that had passed, and into the void was born—especially on the woman's part—a sudden and acute consciousness. Surely this thing had been unwomanly, and the doing of it had shamed her in his eyes; surely, too—and the very thought made her quake—she had shown him in these days that which was a reproach to confess even to herself!

So, when Raimond de Beaufoy rode into camp, he found the tent struck, the pack-horses laden, and Bonne de Salice a full league on her road home. For a moment the Seigneur sat gnawing his lip ; then with his spurs he savaged his beast as he had never savaged it in the heat of battle, and made straight for Salice.

‘ Michel Bische told more truth than he thought,’ said Marmontel to himself as he rode slowly homewards. ‘ She is our Lady of Succour, and none other. That she may be our Lady of Beaufoy I pray the Saints ! Give us your aid, good St. Francis, and I vow you the tallest candle ever seen in the Seigneurie !’

Which vow was honestly paid within a twelve-month.

V

HOW THE KING CAME TO BEAUFOY

WHEN the Count of Dunois, standing by the grave of Charles the Seventh in 1461, said, out of the bitterness of his frosted ambition, 'There is a new master in France ; now let every man see to himself !' Wisdom was justified of her child. Never was there such a tearing down from high places ; never such a shredding and a tattering of hard-earned honours. They flew this way and that, as feathers are sent flying from a pigeon when a hawk has pounced.

Jouvenelle, the Chancellor, lost his place ; Sancerre might be no longer Grand Admiral ; De Lhoëac was stripped of his Marshal's baton ; Du Chastel found his Mastership of the Horse given to another ; the Governorship of Guienne was wrenched from the grip of the Duc de Bourbon. As for chamberlains and counsellors of State, a man was happy if he

kept his head and his lands ; his office was the sure spoil of another. Louis the Eleventh had a long memory, and, as King, knew how to revenge the insults that had embittered the Dauphin. Besides, where men are to be bought, someone must pay the price.

The marvel was that in such a crashing of reputations Raimond de Beaufoy held his place. No man had been more loyal to the late King, and to be loyal to Charles was to be traitor to Louis. Yet Beaufoy prospered, and it must have been that the cruel, treacherous, cold heart of the new King harboured some grateful memory of what had befallen five years before. That Angoumois stared to see Beaufoy confirmed in his Suzerainty was no wonder ; but Angoumois knew nothing of the King's secrets, and the Seigneur was no man to blab.

The story dated from 1456, the year that Louis, exiled these ten years to Dauphiny, sought to build up for himself a kingdom in the South, and was not too nice in his methods. This great lord was tampered with, that one bribed ; the Church snared with specious promises, endowments, immunities, jurisdictions—things dear to hearts that have abjured the

petty pomps of the world ; while a university set up at Vienne argued to the learned the broad mind of the would-be King.

Rumour had it—and with more truth than customary—that, not content with his province, the Dauphin was spreading his lures north and west, and at last Charles became alarmed. Abandoning his beloved gardens, he marched south with the avowed intention of crushing the rebel once and for all, son though he was. Between the death of Louis and the dismemberment of the kingdom there was no room for choice. Charles had a second son, but no second crown. Down through the Orleanais he swept into Berry, and thence to Poitou, avoiding La Marche as tainted with the Dauphin's heresy. From Poitou to Angoumois is but a step, and presently Beaufoy was drawn into the ferment.

It was a mid-August day that the King's letter, written by Dunois, the Grand Chamberlain, reached the Seigneur, and small thanks he gave the messenger who brought it.

'How the pest am I to quarter three hundred men in Beaufoy?' he cried, slapping his clenched hand with the folded paper. 'As reasonably might Egypt cry "Come!" to the locusts that sweep it bare. I am the King's servant, and

my poor house is his since he so wills ; but three hundred of a troop is a heavy tax on a man's goodwill. What is that, my friend ? an honour ? God keep us from all such honours, for a man would buy them dearly at a crown a bushel. Honour, forsooth !—such honour as they gave King Martin of Yvetôt, the honour of eating me out of house and home, the honour of starving for half a year that others may go full-fed a day ! Has thy wisdom aught else to say, my friend ?

‘As I left the camp, Seigneur, Monsieur de Chabannes stopped me, and bade me give you this.’

Fumbling in the pouch at his girdle, he pulled out a paper sealed both back and front—a scrap, no more, unaddressed, but endorsed, ‘Secret, and in haste.’

‘Anthony of Chabannes ! Of a good Angoumois stock is Chabannes, and a sure friend, for all that he is Bretagne born,’ said Beaufoy, breaking open the seals. ‘I would trust Chabannes with—— Now, God give me patience, but this is too much ! Some of you there see to this fellow’s comfort, and do you, Marmontel, hearken : “The King fears Louis ; walk softly for Beaufoy’s sake.” By St. Francis, they know in Paris how to make men traitors !

Link an arm in theirs, and smilingly pick their pocket as you walk. There you have it. "Come, dear friend, and sup," said the fox to the goose. If it were but Charles and Louis and not France herself that would suffer, then, faith of Beaufoy, I might—— But, no, no ; it is France, it is France, and so I must keep the peace and walk softly. Now I understand the three hundred men. They are not so much to honour Charles as to dishonour Beaufoy. Walk softly? Why, so I will ; but a plague on all crooked policies!—and he flung out of the room in a rage.

Thenceforward for three days there was not a soul in Beaufoy, save the year-old boy in his cradle, but lived a bustling life. That lackeys, scullions, and cooks should have their hands full was of course, since the roasting, boiling, and baking was prodigious, though the lists of fish, flesh, fowl, and conceits of pastry so carefully recorded by the chronicler of the day may be left out of the story. For all his wrath, the Seigneur had no mind to shame the hospitality of Beaufoy. But the Seigneur found work for those whose trade was arms, and for those three days a dozen of his most trusted men were here and there through the Seigneurie on their master's business, while their fellows who

remained at the castle slaved over the arms of all, and of more than all.

Five-and-forty there were who drew Beaufoy's pay, and yet in those three days no less than ten-score stands of arms were cleaned, tested, and made ready.

'The odds are still three to two,' said Beaufoy as he saw his men ride out on that third day with swords, pikes, lances, and what-not that did not belong to them—'three to two; but the surprise counts for something, so we will call it an even match.'

Then, having prepared within and without, he set himself to rest. But for all his labour, rest was still far from him. As he sat on a bench in the great justice-room at the fall of dusk that third day, Marmontel, his squire, came to him in something of a pucker.

'There are three without,' he said, 'who say that, will he, nill he, they must have speech with the Seigneur de Beaufoy. I have lied, and they would none of my lies; I have told them truth—in a measure—and they say——'

'You have not told of the coming of the King, blockhead?' cried Beaufoy.

'No, Seigneur, no; I said truth in a measure, but not all the truth.'

‘Then bid them begone with their will he, nill he; let them go as they came. This is no time for strangers.’

‘They came from the south,’ said Marmontel, ‘and if we shut the door in their faces, there is nowhere for them to go but to some peasant’s hut. That, by your leave, Seigneur, would not sort with Beaufoy’s plans.’

‘Hum!’ said Beaufoy, rubbing his chin. ‘Beaufoy’s business will be none the better of clacking tongues. So far, thou art right. The Lord knows who they may be. Since we have no choice, Marmontel, let us do them and ourselves a kindness. To please another to your own profit is true policy. Bid them welcome. Show them all courtesy, and say that since they desire to see Raimond de Beaufoy, he will do himself the honour of supping with them. Madame, my wife, they must excuse. She has that before her which might well try a stronger woman, for ’tis no light thing to play hostess to a King who comes to cut your husband’s throat. Bid them enter, Marmontel, and with the more smoothness that you have been rough in the past. In these times we must keep a frank hand for the mammon of unrighteousness.’

Later, as Beaufoy was changing his rougher

dress for a garb more nice in its courtesy, Marmontel again came to him.

‘If you had searched for a week, Seigneur,’ said he, ‘you could have hit on nothing more to their taste than that you sup alone with them. If a man cannot read men after three score years of life, he never will, and my word for it, these three have something to say beyond the common. You are no drinker, Seigneur, but at supper water is a cool counsellor.’

Raimond de Beaufoy was too wise a man to set his dignity against honest frankness in a man who loved him.

‘So?’ he said gravely, putting his hand on the other’s shoulder. ‘Beyond the common? Why beyond the common?’

‘Because, Seigneur, when I made excuses for my lady, one of them, a meagre chit of a man and the youngest of the three, said softly, “The saints be praised!” and mumbled to himself as a man might in church. No, Seigneur, no,’ he went on hastily, as Beaufoy’s face darkened, ‘not said with offence, but forced out of him as it were by some relief of fear. I’ll wager it was his heart spoke and not his tongue. As for the other two, they looked at one another and nodded as men do who say, “All goes well.”’

‘So?’ said Beaufoy again. ‘You are right, old friend, and I will keep both them and wine at arm’s-length, lest either be traitor; though, by St. Francis, I think there is no mere man fool enough to strike Beaufoy in his own hall!’

It was in a small, plainly-furnished ante-room off a chamber on the ground-floor that Beaufoy waited to receive his self-invited guests. On either side of the door were great lamps in sconces, while a third stood on the small table filling the centre of the room. A settle, three or four stools, and a few antique weapons hung against the wall completed the furnishings.

The Seigneur had not long to wait. There was a brief bustle at the door, and then there entered a burly, broad-shouldered man, bearded and moustached, and ruddy-cheeked for all his middle age. At his heels was a soldier-like figure, erect and wiry, the keen, alert face smooth-shaven. Between the shoulders of the two the third peered into the room, and at the sight of the small, cunning eyes, and the long, arched nose above the cruel mouth, Beaufoy shaded his face with his hand.

‘First De Melun; next Saint Belin; lastly—him! What coil is here?’ he said under his breath. Then, striding forward: ‘Messieurs,

you are very welcome to Beaufoy,' he cried; 'and if at first there seemed a scant hospitality, let supper blot out its memory. We must be our own heralds, messieurs. I am Raimond de Beaufoy.'

'To be less frank than you grieves me, Seigneur,' answered the first, 'but the times are ticklish. By your leave, I am Messire Moi-même; this, Messire Soi-même, and this——'

'This,' broke in Beaufoy, with a bow, 'I make no doubt is Messire Lui-même! Be it so, gentlemen; your supper will, I trust, be none the worse, nor your sleep less peaceful. Names are your affair, bread and salt binds Beaufoy. My squire tells me you had something to say to me. For the present let that rest; talk and a full stomach are good company. To table, gentlemen, to table!'

Drawing aside a curtain that hid a doorway in the side of the room, Beaufoy motioned to his guests to enter before him.

'Messire Moi-même, you there by yonder lamp; you, messire, on this side; and you,' and he turned to the third guest, a meagre, shrunken, white-faced man of some five-and-thirty, smooth-cheeked, small-eyed, thin-lipped, and with hair so long as to brush his shoulders—

‘you, Messire Lui-même, face to face ; not in opposition, you understand, but that we may the better know one another ;’ and the Seigneur laughed as a man laughs who is unaccustomed to make even a feeble jest.

Through the meal their talk was of this or that ; the coming vintage, the promise of the wheat crop, wine, women, horses, the new-fangled war weapons, the dozen subjects that are in men’s mouths as they sup. But of parties and policies Beaufoy would have nothing. If Messire Moi-même began upon taxation, Beaufoy had a story that led the talk elsewhere. If Messire Soi-même brought in the discontent of the people, Beaufoy declaimed on the troubles of a Seigneurie. If cruel-faced Messire Lui-même spoke of King or Dauphin, Beaufoy talked of France.

‘And who,’ said he, ‘is more a son of France than Prince Louis himself ?’ and straightway told a tale that lauded both the father and the son.

But at last the meal ended, and as the door closed behind the lackeys the Seigneur turned to his guest on the left.

‘You have business, messire,’ said he ; ‘but before business just one word of gossip. Beaufoy is honoured beyond common. To-

day it is—you ; to-morrow—the King of France and three hundred of a troop.'

'The King—here? St. Denis! have you sold us, Seigneur de Beaufoy?' cried the bearded man, striking his hand noisily on the table. 'Is this a trap?'

'By St. Francis!' and Beaufoy stared him down across the angle of the table, 'if we were not host and guest you would answer for that discourtesy. No trap, and least of all of my setting.'

'But, Seigneur,' and his neighbour on the right caught him by a sinewy hand, 'you might have told us——'

'Told you? And what *câres* Messire Soimême whether the King of France sleeps at Paris, Beaufoy, or Grenoble? I tell you now, lest when I say to-morrow, "Gentlemen, the King sleeps at Beaufoy, and where a King comes even pronouns must give place—or declare themselves," you will not think me churlish.'

When the Seigneur had first spoken, he who supped fronting him had half started to his feet, his face gone gray with terror, but by an effort he regained his self-control.

'Messire de Beaufoy is right,' said he, speaking very slowly: 'what have we in common with the King of France? Let us rest to-

night, Seigneur, and to-morrow you will be rid of us.'

'And your business?'

They looked at one another a moment, then one began: 'Oh, ay, the business——' but he who had spoken last interrupted him, speaking sharply and to the point.

'The King sleeps here to-morrow night?'

'To-morrow night.'

'How many has he with him?'

'Three hundred men and all armed.'

'Will he sleep alone?'

'That is as he chooses, messire.'

'I mean, is there access to his room?'

'He will sleep safe,' said Beaufoy, 'as safe as you yourself.'

'How far off lies the army?'

'Twelve leagues, perhaps; perhaps fifteen.'

'Its strength?'

'The strength of Normandy, Ile de France, Poitou, Maine, Touraine, Angoumois — the strength of France.'

Loosening his doublet, Messire Lui-même drew a small reliquary from his bosom, kissed it, and passed it across the table to the Seigneur.

'It is the true cross,' he said simply; 'swear on it that what you say is true.'

Lifting it to his lips, Beaufoy said: 'My word

is my word, but, since you will have it so, before God it is true ;' and handed it back.

For a moment the other sat silent, thinking deeply, then he said :

'When a man throws ames ace to sixes he must needs pay forfeit. If you were at Grenoble, what would you counsel the Dauphin at such a time as this?'

'If I were so far honoured as to be the Dauphin's counsellor,' said Beaufoy, speaking deliberately, 'I would remember that the Duke of Burgundy is father-in-law to my sister.'

'Ha! I understand. Heels, not heads and hands! We have done our business, gentlemen,' and he rose from the table. 'Seigneur de Beaufoy, our compliments to Madame, your wife. It grieves us that we must needs leave betimes in the morning, and so cannot pay our respects in person.'

With no more talk than Beaufoy's farewells for the night, they were gone, a lackey lighting them to their chambers above.

But they were not so soon to turn their backs on Château Beaufoy. Next morning, as the Seigneur waited them in the little ante-room, Messire Moi-même, as he had chosen to call himself, put in his appearance alone and with a face two feet long and as white as new plaster.

‘Of all the accursed mischances to happen here, and to-day of all days! My friend, he that sat facing you—a man to stand well with, I can tell you, Seigneur de Beaufoy—is down with an ague.’

‘An ague?’ cried Beaufoy, straightening himself and looking the other full in the eyes. ‘An ague? Faith of a gentleman, Messire?’

‘Faith of a gentleman!’ said the other pettishly. ‘What the plague would a man want to feign an ague for?’

‘Because the King——’

‘Ay, because the King! What do we want with the King? ’Tis an ague plain enough, and to ride on to-day is death.’

‘Oh, an ague?’ said Beaufoy coolly. ‘Monseigneur caught it at Saint Jacques in ’44, I take it? By my faith, the Switzers gave us all more than we wanted!’

‘Monseigneur? Saint Jacques? Are you mad, Seigneur de Beaufoy?’

‘Am I a fool, Monsieur de Melun,’ retorted Beaufoy, ‘to go through a campaign with the Dauphin and not know him?’

‘Then you knew us from the first?’

‘From the first, Monsieur de Melun *Moi-même*, or *Moi-même* de Melun, as it pleases

you. Faith of Beaufoy! but it was a child's masquerade.'

'Then,' cried De Melun, snatching at his sword, but letting the sneer pass, 'a plain answer, are you for Charles or Louis?'

'What! a plain answer under compulsion of bare steel? Tut! tut! put it up, Monsieur, put it up. If I called but once, you would have ten men on your back before you could stir a yard, and we would be free of factions in France. What better would you be of my murder? Would that cure Monseigneur of his ague? As for Charles or Louis, I am for France, and that, as it seems to me, is between the two.'

'Give me your pardon, Seigneur,' and in his vexation De Melun half flung his blade back into its sheath. 'Indeed, I am half mad with forebodings. The Prince dare not budge, and I know the suspicions of this crazy King. There is not a room in Beaufoy but he will take an oath of you as to who bides there, even to the very flies. It was a mad freak, this ride; a fool's freak perhaps, and yet, had we gained you, the vassals at Vaucourt, Grandfrai, and I know not where, all would have followed like sheep. Now we are the sheep, and in ten hours comes the butcher.'

'I will take as many oaths as the King wills,

and will lie in none of them,' answered the Seigneur. 'Only Monseigneur must bate his dignity and keep close.'

'His dignity!' cried De Melun, and in his earnestness he spoke a larger truth than he meant. 'When it is to his profit, Monseigneur has no dignity.'

'Come, then.'

Out into the great hall strode Beaufoy, up the twisting narrow stairway, and down the broad corridor of the floor above. Opening a door on the right, he bade De Melun follow him, and the two found themselves in a large, wide room that ran along the front of the Château, and which was furnished in a kind of barbaric splendour.

The slow accumulations of many raids and petty wars were stored within, and five generations of Beaufoys had brought them together. The hangings were the spoil of Flanders, the satin-covered settles and stools were of carved Lombard work, Spain had had a hand in the weaving of the curtains, and the great sombre, solitary bed that lay like a catafalque along the side-wall, had been the glory of an ancient Savoy stronghold. The petty adornments of inlaid tables, cabinets, and sconce mouldings came from as many principalities as they were

numerous. But the gildings were tarnished, and, for all its incongruity of wealth, the room had a mournful air of desuetude.

‘For the King,’ said Beaufoy with a gesture, as he walked across to the wall behind the head of the great bed. ‘The Dauphin can surely find no fault if he be lodged next.’

Fumbling in the carvings, he touched a spring that set the panel moving, and disclosed a narrow, gray space hid in the thickness of the wall.

‘The Dauphin lie there?’ cried De Melun. ‘Man! he would as soon sleep in a vault.’

‘By St. Francis!’ said the Seigneur grimly, ‘you have hit the choice of hosts. ’Tis death or Beaufoy!’

De Melun went forward a step or two. It was no more than a five-foot passage-way running the whole breadth of the room, and with no roof but that of the Château, the only light being from a narrow window set thirty feet up in the wall. The dust in it lay thick, and the very air smelt of motes.

‘The Dauphin lie here!’ cried De Melun a second time as he peered about him in the dusk. ‘A pretty lurking-place for a son of France!’ Then he whipped round on Beaufoy and caught him roughly by the shoulders. ‘A trap, by

St. Denis, a trap! You would give us all three——'

But the Seigneur pushed him staggering back against the further wall.

'God grant me patience!' he cried, stamping his foot. 'Pest take you and your traps! What greater need of a trap is there than that you have thrust your fool's head into already? If I wished to be the first man in the kingdom, I could cry my terms to-night and run no risk of a haggle, and without all this pother. Beware of overmuch suspicion, Messire de Melun; it breeds treason, and treason breeds an ill end. Trust me or leave me; you have your choice.'

It may be that when, twelve years after to the very month, De Melun died the death of a traitor on the scaffold in Andely, the Seigneur's warning came back to him.

'We have no choice,' he answered sullenly. 'Leave you we cannot, and therefore we trust you.'

'Did I bid you come here?' cried Beaufoy in a rage as he turned back to the corridor, 'and is it my gain that you stay? Since you are here, Madame de Beaufoy will have the place made as habitable as may be, but for myself I must go meet the King.'

'But your people, Seigneur?'

‘My people are my people,’ answered Beaufoy curtly; ‘have no fears of my people.’

Four hours later, with no more than Marmontel and two others as guard, he was waiting the coming of Charles at the northern outskirts of the forest of Beaufoy. Nor had he long to wait. First, in the far distance, seen between the patches of trees, there was the growing dun of a dust-cloud, then the glint of steel or silver as the sun caught a burnished point of armour or some polished chain or plate of the beasts’ housings, and at last the dark loom of the troop through the rolling veil. Charles was as good as his word, and had plainly brought his full three hundred.

‘Best ride on and meet them, Seigneur,’ advised Marmontel.

But Beaufoy would not budge.

‘Not I,’ said he. ‘I will show him every courtesy, but no faith till I’m out of the wood.’ And reining aside, he let the head of the troop pass him without a word.

But as Charles rode up with Tanneguy du Chastel, his Master of the Horse, on the one hand, and Dunois, the Grand Chamberlain, on the other, Beaufoy flung his reins to Marmontel, and dismounting, knelt in the three-inch-deep dust of the road.

‘Welcome to Beaufoy, sire!’ he cried, uncovering.

‘What! what! what!’ said Charles, leaning forward and peering at the Seigneur across Dunois. ‘Whom have we here? Whom have we here? Keep you between us, Messire le Comte.’

‘It is Messire de Beaufoy, sire,’ said Dunois — ‘a brave and loyal gentleman, as I believe.’

‘Ay, ay, that may be, that may be, but we hear strange tales of Messire de Beaufoy. You hold your head over-high, Messire, and at times courage and pride are ill bed-fellows to loyalty. What! what! There are whispers abroad.’

‘Let those who whisper speak out plainly, sire,’ said Beaufoy boldly, ‘and by St. Francis, I shall know how so to answer them that they shall not whisper a second time.’

‘To speak bluntly,’ said Dunois, ‘the King means that rumour has it you have taken Louis to your heart.’

‘Ay, ay,’ broke in Charles. ‘Do you know the fable of him who warmed the serpent? God show him mercy who warms Louis, for he’ll have need of it.’

‘Let deeds answer words, sire,’ replied Beaufoy. ‘Angoumois holds me for no fool, and yet I am here with but three men, as you see.’

‘What? No more than that?’ cried Charles. ‘Well, for this night we will trust you at arm’s length, Messire de Beaufoy. Mount and ride on with us.’

Thereafter there was but little talk. At rare intervals Charles roused himself to ask of this or that, but his mind wandered and interest died with the question. As for Dunois and Du Chastel, they, like good courtiers, took their cue from their master and nursed their thoughts in silence. Once, and once only, Du Chastel spoke.

‘Where the plague does the wind come from?’ said he. ‘Listen! There is not a rustle above us, and yet the growth on either side is all astir with the blast.’

‘It is plain you are no woodsman, Grand Master,’ said Beaufoy carelessly, ‘or you would understand better how in these hollows the breeze is sucked in by the coolness. Once clear of the wood, there will be none of it.’

‘Then bid them ride faster,’ and Charles straightened himself in his saddle. ‘The place is lifeless, and I hate it. Is there always this quiet, Messire de Beaufoy?’

‘We are a quiet people, sire,’ said Beaufoy, and said no more.

‘What! what! what! A quiet people?’

echoed the King. 'God keep me from such quiet. I would sooner jostle shoulders with my loving son Louis than face it.'

Nor did the open country please the King better.

'Send word forward, Du Chastel, that we ride through yonder village. I am sick of solitude. What is its name, Messire de Beaufoy?'

'Charnex, sire.'

'And how many inhabitants?'

'Some two hundred, sire.'

'Good, good! then at last we shall see life.'

But as they rode slowly between the double lines of straggling houses his face darkened. There was not a peasant in the trim gardens, not a woman spinning in the porches; the doors were shut and life there was none, or no more than a child's frightened white face at a window. A silence deeper than the silence of the woods brooded over it.

'God's mercy!' he cried wrathfully, 'has a plague smitten Beaufoy that the place is void?'

'It is harvest, sire, and the women are abroad in the fields.'

'The fields! the fields! What! what! what! Are your women slaves, Messire, that

they should labour in the fields while the men bide at ease? Where are the men?’

‘The men are—elsewhere, sire,’ answered Beaufoy. ‘They might have thought that with such a company the King came in wrath, and they love their Seigneur, poor souls! so I bade them keep——’

‘Say no more, Seigneur de Beaufoy,’ cried Charles, giving him his title for the first time. ‘I see plainly men lied about you. Ride on, gentlemen, ride on!’

‘And this,’ said the King, some four hours later, when, having supped, he was being conducted to the chamber set apart for his use—‘and this is Château Beaufoy? With your leave, Seigneur, we will go on a tour of inspection. What! what! what! am I not a soldier? and plaguily near a hostile country, too! It is a soldier’s duty to go his rounds—eh, Dunois, eh? Here, for my train? Good! good! those walls would stand somewhat of a siege. For all our need, we have no better in Paris. And this chamber? and this? Ay, ay, see to it, Dunois, that we have men in all these. And this?’

‘This, sire,’ and Beaufoy paused with his hand on the door, ‘this is set apart for Madame my wife, and adjoins that which you yourself honour.’

‘What! what! what!’ said Charles cunningly. ‘Adjoins, eh? With your leave, Seigneur, with your leave. Madame is below, I think, and it is a soldier’s duty—duty, you understand, duty, no more. A noble room truly, and yonder is the little Seigneur’s cradle. A wise mother who keeps her babe by her side. I would to the Lord there were more like her in France! Dunois, see to it that three of our men sleep in the passage-way before Madame’s door, lest she be disturbed. Yet there is no need for alarm, Seigneur; it is but a courtesy, no more, no more.’

‘I humbly thank you, sire; but, by St. Francis! Beaufoy can see to Beaufoy’s own.’

‘Good! good! good! Nevertheless, Dunois, you hear?—three in the passage. And this? Why, we are royally lodged. Yet, in August even so large a room strikes cold when used alone. Let five sleep here, Dunois—five, and set the usual sentries at the door. As to the floor above, let Chabannes see to it; he knows, eh, eh?—he knows, eh? Now then, my valets, I am ready,’ and having safeguarded himself at every point, Charles the Well-Served went to his rest.

It might have been an hour later that

Raimond de Beaufoy, from Madame's side of the wall, set the panel moving, and found Louis the Dauphin reared upon his elbow in his narrow bed; a rushlight flickering by his side set the shadows dancing so that it might have been either a scowl or a smile that met the Seigneur as he went down upon his knee.

'Has the King come?—and is De Melun right?' whispered Louis in a hiss. 'Is he there, Seigneur de Beaufoy?' and he flung his right arm backward with a quick gesture.

'The King has come and is there, Monseigneur,' answered De Beaufoy, speaking under his breath.

'There? there?' and Louis shook his clenched hand in the air, 'not four feet away, said De Melun. Not four feet away? Tell me'—leaning forward, he caught Beaufoy half round the neck, drawing him so close that his lips touched his ear—'there is a spring from this side? I thought so, and the King is not four feet away! Would you be Grand Admiral, Seigneur de Beaufoy? Would you be Marshal of France? Would you be Governor of the Ile de France, or change your petty Seigneurie for all Guienne? There is a spring, De Beaufoy, there is a spring, and the King is not four feet away! Would you be first subject in the

kingdom, Seigneur de Beaufoy ?' His hot fingers closed on the Seigneur's neck. 'Not four feet away,' he whispered, 'not four feet, and every man asleep!'

Then he drew back, and, with his hand upon Beaufoy's shoulder, lay eyeing him.

But not for long, five seconds maybe, for Louis, with all his superstitions and leaden saints, was no fool. He could read a man's 'no' as well as another, and the silent rebuke in the Seigneur's eyes lashed his self-love like a whip. The evil look in his eyes struggled with a sour smile on the mouth, and his hand fell down upon the coverlid.

'When my hour comes,' he said, 'may God grant me also men that can keep faith. Tut, tut! hold thy peace, man; I want deeds, not words,' and he turned his face to the darkness.

Suddenly he rounded upon his shoulder again, and groping in his breast, drew out the reliquary.

'If not for me, Seigneur de Beaufoy, at least not against me. Swear that, come what will, you hold me safe!'

Taking it into his hand, the Seigneur turned it over, thinking deeply. He knew the Dauphin to his heart's core: his cold unforgiving cruelty, his tenacious memory for a wrong or slight,

real or fancied, and the evil look and the sour smile were to him as the shadow of death.

‘Is an oath on such a thing more binding than a man’s honest word, Monseigneur?’

‘Words come and words go, and nought comes of them!’ said Louis, his face paling in the shadows, ‘but whoso swears falsely on this dies within the year. Does the oath bind? Ay, by God’s life it does bind! Swear, Seigneur de Beaufoy, swear.’

‘Swear you first, Monseigneur,’ said Beaufoy, drawing a deep breath as a man might who played a heavy stake. ‘Swear that, come what will, as King or Dauphin, you will uphold, strengthen and confirm Raimond de Beaufoy and his heirs in the Suzerainty, and bind your issue so to do.’

‘You have my word to that,’ said Louis earnestly. ‘In all frankness I pledge you that. After to-night I could do no less.’

‘Words come and words go and leave nought behind,’ answered Beaufoy doggedly. ‘Swear, Monseigneur, and quickly, I pray you, lest in asking I raise my voice.’

And with a scowl Louis swore.

Taking the reliquary in his turn, Beaufoy touched it with his lips.

‘Before God, Monseigneur, I will hold you safe.’

Rising to his feet, he bowed as if to Charles himself, and had his hand upon the panel to close it, when Louis stopped him with a gesture.

‘You still advise Burgundy?’

‘Burgundy and patience, Monseigneur. With two such allies, your time will come.’

‘Then farewell, Seigneur de Beaufoy, and by the Saints! I think my oath was a wise stroke both for me and for you. I can say so, now that my blood is cooler.’

Then he again turned his face to the dark, and Beaufoy could hear him moaning to himself: ‘Not four feet away, not four feet, and all men asleep!’ And the man he would have murdered in his bed was his father!

With so much fuel ready for a spark to set it in a roar that would have scorched France, there was little rest for Beaufoy that night. Not a flap of a shutter in the wind, not a scamper of a rat in the wainscot, not a stumble of the sentinel in the corridor, not a cry of a nightbird but was the very voice of death. Even the quiet sigh and rustle of the child in his cradle was the fumbling of parricide fingers, blindly groping for the hidden spring. The hundred voices of the silence called him con-

tinually, and his ears were for ever on the strain for a cry. But the night passed undisturbed, and the gray of the dawn slipped into its blackness.

It was a mighty consolation to his host that, having to ride to Grandfrai, where he was to be guest to Bishop Theodore, Charles had no mind to dally. He was early awake, early afoot, and an hour after Beaufoy had given Marmontel his orders for the day, sending him and four others out at top-speed—that is to say, by ten o'clock—the King was ready for the saddle.

‘What! what! what!’ he cried, ‘you ride with us, Seigneur de Beaufoy, to see us safe back to France again? Here we have been in a new country and at peace. By St. Denis! you must teach us kingcraft, since your will is law, and with no more than ten of an army to back it, while I—— But then, Seigneur, your son is in his cradle.’

The weak suspicious face grew pathetic, and not even the first beginnings of the Valois madness could destroy the dignity of its sorrow. Presently he roused himself.

‘I must forget the son—at least, so says Dunois—and remember nothing but the rebel; and yet, De Beaufoy, yet—— Eh, eh! here is

Dunois, and to be a king in these times a man must remember to forget.'

'All is ready, sire, and we may move forward,' said Dunois, riding up. 'What, De Beaufoy, do you ride alone?'

'Why, yes,' answered the Seigneur carelessly, 'I have, as you saw, but few fellows, and I sent them out on errands an hour ago.'

'What is that? what is that?' cried the King, leaning forward, and his face wrinkling in its uneasiness. 'On errands? But you ride with us?'

'Yes, sire, and wherever you bid me ride.'

'Why, why, here, between Dunois and Du Chastel, and let Sancerre come on my other side. So long as we have you with us, De Beaufoy, the errands will be peace.'

'What, Sire!' cried the Seigneur, 'do you still doubt me?'

'Doubt! who talks of doubt?' said Charles cunningly. 'What are we but soldiers?—and good soldiers, you know, De Beaufoy—good soldiers must be cautious. Dunois, where is that parchment? Ay, give it to our good cousin, the Count de Charnex. What! what! what! is that mistrust, Seigneur? Only, the Lord send you more folk in the village; 'twas like a tomb.'

‘Sire,’ began Beaufoy.

‘There, there, let it pass, Monsieur de Charnex—let it pass. I thought you a rogue, a harbourer of rebels and the like, and found you an honourable gentleman. Would to the Lord there were more in France; they might all be Count or Baron to the profit of the kingdom! What! the forest again, and as silent as yesterday! Are you a huntsman, De Charnex?’

‘Why, yes, sire, like every country gentleman. But how can I——’

‘I know, I know. Listen, Monsieur le Comte’—and he echoed the Dauphin; ‘when I want gratitude, I will ask for works, not words; I will say, “Bring me that rebel, Louis,” and you will do it. Eh, eh! am I right? But I thought you a huntsman from the whistle on your breast.’

‘You have a quick eye, sire’—and Beaufoy lifted the silver call that dangled by a chain from his neck. ‘We woodsmen have need of such a thing, since to lose one’s self in such a tangle of timber is no hard matter. The sound of this would be heard half a mile.’

‘Blow it, and let me judge,’ cried Charles, his face aglow with interest, like a child’s.

Lifting it to his lips, the Seigneur filled his

lungs with a deep breath for a mighty blast, then dropped the whistle to its full stretch of the chain.

‘I am no coward, sire,’ he said gravely, ‘and yet, I dare not.’

‘What! what! what! dare not? Why dare not?’

‘Because, sire, when a man calls for nought in these woods——’

‘Nought comes,’ broke in Dunois.

‘By St. Francis, not so!’ said Beaufoy; ‘but what may come no man can foretell. Yet, if the King wills——’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Charles; ‘let the whim go. Hark, Sancerre, to the wind, how it sighs and rustles in the grass! The Saints be praised there is Christian sunlight in front! Ride on, gentlemen. The Lord be thanked for the sweetness of free air! Farewell, De Charnex; God send whoever comes after me in France such faithful, honest gentlemen as yourself. To-night and every night may I have as frank and trustful a host.’

At a wave of the King’s hand the troop moved on, leaving Beaufoy sitting bareheaded in the sunlight. For full three minutes he waited motionless; then, with a jerk of the reins, he turned his beast and rode slowly back

into the forest. At the first great dimness overhead he halted and looked back across his shoulder to where the King's troop was fast being lost in the distance; then he raised the whistle to his mouth; he blew it shrilly.

'Would nought come!' he said grimly, 'Dunois would have thought he had raised the devil's legions.'

From right and left, out of every bush and brake and overgrown bunch of grass, with lance or sword or pike or what-not ready in their hands, the men of Beaufoy, two hundred strong, drew in behind him.

'Come, my children,' he cried; 'the Seigneur is safe for this time. A man plays none the worse for having the dice loaded; but, in His mercy, may God send us no more kings and princes.'

VI

THE JUSTICE OF BEAUFOY

IT was in the time of old Raimond that the House of Beaufoy rose to the highest point of its power. As in most affairs of life, a combination of things good and evil tended to bring this about.

The good was that for two generations before him there was peace within the borders of the Suzerainty, or what in those turbulent times counted as peace, so that Beaufoy's men and the villages that called him lord thrived exceedingly. Herds and flocks increased, cornlands grew out of the brushwood of the valley wilderness, and vineyards pushed their way up the slopes.

The evil was that Raimond de Beaufoy was orphaned at twelve months old ; and yet out of this evil there sprang another good. Bertrand de Freyne, the little lad's guardian, was strong-brained, strong-armed, stout-hearted, and

ambitious. From the Château he lorded it like any king ; but like a king also, he let no man touch his trust, so that under him Beaufoys lands crept north and south, and east and west, and crept fast.

Then, after seventeen years, came another stroke of fortune to young Raimond. Bertrand de Freyne caught the small-pox and died in four days, thus leaving the way clear for the young Seigneur to step unopposed into his inheritance. His right was, indeed, indisputable ; but had Bertrand lived, the heir might have found himself thrust from his place, and the strong hand have held what the strong arm won. Death settled all that.

During these seventeen years young De Beaufoys received but little training save that of arms. Busied here and there on the affairs of the trust, which he had come to look upon as his own, Bertrand de Freyne had no leisure to waste upon his nephew's upbringing ; he therefore left him to monk, varlet, and squire. These, in their turn, had no mind to cross the lad. It is an ill thing for an underling when a lord of life and death hath a long memory ; so the old wisdom that the heir, so long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, was never learned by Raimond de Beaufoys.

If that were true while his guardian lived, how much the more was it true when the heir had come to his own! And it is to the Seigneur's credit that at fifty he was still an honourable gentleman, as the honour of the times went, though passionate withal, and holding Raimond de Beaufoy, Sieur of Mesnil and Count of Charnex, to stand next to the King in all France. Wherein, in the personal appraisement, he was like five hundred more of that hot-tempered and arrogant age.

Seated on a high chair, raised two steps up from the flagged floor of the justice-room, the Seigneur was upholding the dignity of the law and of Beaufoy, if, indeed, there was any distinction in his mind between the one and the other. Behind, and at each side, were half a dozen men-at-arms, bare-headed, leather-jerkined, and carrying pikes in their hands. In front, stretched lengthwise across the hall, was an oak table, black with age, behind which stood the culprit, guarded. A slack-shouldered shambling fellow, with a flabby face, eyes over-close together, and heavy, thick lips showing out of a bristle of beard. Midway was a group of rustics, the witnesses in the case; for the Seigneur held to, at least, the forms of justice. Clerk there was none. What need was there

of record, since Beaufoy himself was the sole court of appeal?

‘What art thou, fellow?’

‘A poor goatherd, Seigneur, the Lord knows how poor.’

‘How poor! By my faith, rather a king among goatherds, since nothing less than Beaufoy’s deer will content thy stomach! If goatherds eat Beaufoy’s venison, what will their betters eat? Beaufoy himself! This must be stopped.’

‘Mercy, Seigneur, mercy!’ cried the man, his thick lips all a-tremble. ‘It was no more than a wild thing, and——’

‘Hearken, fellow,’ and for the first time Beaufoy showed anger. ‘Knowst thou that all that walks on legs on Beaufoy’s lands, that swims with fins in Beaufoy’s waters, or flies with wings in Beaufoy’s air, be it tame or wild, man, beast, fish, or fowl, is mine? Wild things, fool? It had been a smaller matter hadst thou slain one of thy common kind. Ye are thick enough, God wot, for none to grieve at the thinning. Wild things? Away with thy chatter of wild things! Did that doctrine spread, we would have thee calling thyself thine own next! By St. Francis, thou shalt hang to prove that, at least, to be no truth,’ and he struck his

open palm wrathfully on the flat arm of the chair.

‘What is thy name?’

‘Peter, Seigneur, Peter the goatherd; no more.’

‘A true prophecy.’ And Beaufoy laughed. ‘When I hang thee, thou wilt be Peter the goatherd no more. Hast thou wife or child?’

‘No, Seigneur, no, but give me time——’

‘Then there will be fewer to weep,’ said Beaufoy slowly. ‘I would set my fief against a sheep’s carcase that thou hast shed other blood than a deer’s in thy day. The Lord God has written greed, murder, and wantonness across thy face for all to see, and Beaufoy will be well rid of thee. The sentence is——’

But what the sentence was Peter the goatherd was spared the hearing for that time.

Of a sudden, from without, there arose a bluster of tongues, a rumble of suppressed hoarse tones, and rising through it a shrill outcry that cut its way across the courtyard clear to the great hall, and closed Beaufoy’s lips.

‘Justice, Seigneur, justice! Justice and vengeance! See how they have mishandled Beaufoy’s man.’

Then from the threshold came the shuffle of feet, the stress and sound of struggle, and a storm of voices.

‘Hold back, fool, and bide thy time.’

‘Nay, but this is my time. Would ye hold back if ye were so mishandled?’

‘But the Seigneur is within, and——’

‘Ay, he is within, and so am I here. Hold back ye, rather!’

Again there was the scuffling of feet and the panting of hard-drawn breath. But Beaufoy leaped from his chair and cried across the hall, in a voice that roared the tumult down to silence :

‘Stand aside, fellows! And do thou come in, Beaufoy’s man. For justice thou criest, and by the Lord, justice thou shalt have! Come in, I say!’

As Beaufoy ended, the door, which had been ajar, was flung open, and a man rushed in, half staggering, and groping with his hands as one dazed. For a moment he paused on the threshold staring wildly ; then, seeing the Seigneur at the further end of the hall, he ran across and flung himself at his feet.

‘God’s grace, fellow ! who hath used thee so?’ cried Beaufoy, drawing back. ‘If it comes not of thine own folly, then by St. Francis, my

patron, he should suffer for his vile work, were he my own son !

Panting and sobbing, the peasant gripped hard the Seigneur's chair, and looked up into a gaze that was half pity, half repulsion—looked up, gasping and stammering incoherent words ; for now that he had his heart's desire his speech failed him.

Well did the poor wretch deserve his master's compassion. Twice he had been struck, and the blows driven home by a heavy hand and with a vicious will. The nose was shattered, an eye crushed, the mouth and one cheek no more than a bloody patch. The hair of the beard was matted in the drip of the wounds.

‘Whose work is this, man? Kneel not there mumming and mewling, but tell thy tale. Three of you have yon goatherd into safe keeping. His turn can wait, and by my faith, it will come soon enough. Now, then, thy tale.’

‘I am a man of Salpice, thy village, Seigneur, and my wheat is green in the clod. Four reivers, who call Jean de la Tour master, turned from the road to ride across it, and as I caught one by the bridle to force him back, he smote me twice athwart the face with his staff. Twice, Seigneur, twice—see ! With

his thumb he thrust up a battered eyebrow. 'Blind, blind, blind!' and he fell a-whimpering.

'Speak truth, fellow, for it would be an everlasting shame if an honest man hung for a rogue's lie! Beyond the catching his bridle, what else didst thou?'

'Nought, Seigneur; by St. Francis of Beaufoy, nought, and he smote me twice—see!'

This time he gaped his mouth to show the splintered teeth within, then he reared himself high on his knees, and putting out a shaking hand, gripped Beaufoy by the foot.

'How dost thou know he was Jean de la Tour's man?'

'There were four of them, Seigneur: one, La Tour's squire—him I know well; two that followed at his heels—them I also know well; and this fellow and all four rode off, hot-spurred, to their master's hold. Had they been masterless men, Seigneur, I had paid my own score,' and he shifted his hand from Beaufoy's foot to a woodman's knife that hung at his girdle.

'Ay,' said Beaufoy, 'La Tour's arm is over-long for thee, but by St. Francis! mine is longer. Marmontel,' and he turned to his squire, 'see to his hurts, and within the hour

let twenty of Beaufoy's men be in the saddle. Pikes, Marmontel, broadswords, and a bag or two of powder. Be at ease, man ; if vengeance can heal hurts, thy sufferings are well-nigh over.'

An hour later a party of a score strong, with Beaufoy at its head, and Marmontel half a yard behind his master's elbow, was riding slowly over the still wintry fields. There was no question now of young wheat or newly-planted vineyard. The Seigneur rode straight forward, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left.

'Three leagues, is it not, Marmontel?' said he. 'Some fifty minutes' ride, since, with the day in hand, there is no haste. There will be no trouble with Jean de la Tour, I take it?'

'A scant three leagues, Seigneur, and as for La Tour, he will show fight, for he comes of a stock with more courage than crowns, and pride than patience ; but the place is outworn and ramshackle. My word on it, but he'll fight ; for he is Lectoure born, and you know the saying :

"A Duke of Lorraine, with King for sire,
Hath no more pride than a Gascon squire."

'Then he may eat his pride,' said the other

grimly ; 'for by St. Francis ! I'll have no man ruffling it within the four corners of Beaufoy, be he Gascon or Angoumois.'

Marmontel was right as to the condition of Jean de la Tour's hold. Fire and time had left their mark upon its stout walls, and of the rambling structure little remained habitable but the centre portion and its flanking turrets. The wings were shattered and roofless ruins.

Posting two men at the rear lest his prey should break back and escape unchallenged, Beaufoy bade his troop wait his orders, and rode forward to the great door alone. With La Tour he had no quarrel, and if the fellow who had so mishandled his churl were given up to his justice, he would turn his bridle and begone, with, doubtless, a curt warning to leave Beaufoy's men unharmed in the future. If La Tour were obstinate, then, by the saints ! the master might pay the man's fault ; and whether it was master or man, Beaufoy cared little.

Which it was to be was not long left uncertain, for while he was still thirty paces off, Jean de la Tour himself appeared at the open door : a tall, burly man, smooth-shaven after the fashion of the day, and some five years younger than the Seigneur.

‘When Raimond de Beaufoy does a thing, he does it well,’ said he in sour jest. ‘Here have I been four years in my poor house with never so much as a “God save you!” and now you come to do me honour with a troop at your heels.’

‘By my faith, you are right,’ answered the Seigneur, ‘and what Raimond de Beaufoy has come to do this day he will do well indeed! Though it lies in my mind you will find little of honour in it.’

Sitting back in his saddle, he very curtly told his story, while Jean de la Tour, three steps down from his open door, listened with much outward courtesy.

At the end, ‘Give me the fellow and let me go,’ said Beaufoy. ‘With you I desire a quarrel as little as I fear it; but have the man I must and will. When I have done with him you may have him back, and welcome.’

‘It is long,’ answered the other slowly, ‘very long, since a man said “I must” to Jean de la Tour, and the novelty sticks and is hard to swallow. Besides, in this matter there is a thing I know and a thing I do not know. The thing I do not know is that any man of mine has done you wrong, and the thing I do know is that if the tale be true, your

churl got no more than his deserts. When Beaufoy comes to La Tour in courtesy and without "I wills" and "I musts" in his mouth,' he went on, 'he will ever find an open door; but when he comes as to-day the door is better—thus.'

Turning, he walked leisurely up the steps, and entering, thrust to the door behind him, and Beaufoy heard the jar of heavy bolts shot into their sockets.

'Faith!' said he to himself, as he rode slowly back to his waiting troop, 'tis a pity, a sore pity, that the man is a fool; but there is no room for both him and me in Beaufoy.'

What followed thereafter, though it cost five lives, has little to do with the story, and so may be briefly summarized. First, a short council. 'Blow me in that door, Marmontel; or, rather, take two with thee and do it.' So three went forward where but two came back, for one lay across the steps with a cracked spine. The stones of La Tour's parapet were heavy and loose, easy to his hand, and his aim was sure. Then came a rush under cover of the pungent smoke, a rush that blooded both sides, for one of Beaufoy's men went down with a pike in his breast, dragging with him the man who had thrust it home, and the two, rolling into a

corner, ended their battle in quiet. The rush carried the entrance, and the guttural curse and heavy breath as they strove in the narrow pass were followed by a roar that rumbled the dust from the rafters of the antique roof of the great square hall, a roar of hoarse cries, rasped steel, and shuffling, stamping feet. Then, of a sudden, there came a great calm.

The strife had been unequal. Two of La Tour's men were on the floor, the one upon his face, the other heaped across him and curved backwards, staring with blind eyes at the dim roof, and the rest—some four—had, on an order from their master, flung down their swords, and were cramped in a corner, sullenly glaring at Beaufoy like so many wild beasts. Of Jean de la Tour, dead or alive, there was no sign.

'Have these four into a sure hold,' cried the Seigneur, 'but do them no harm. That they fought, and fought well, for the hand that fed them, stands to their credit. As for their master—disperse, fellows, and seek him out. It does not fit with the honour of Beaufoy that the man who flouts its justice should escape scot-free.'

Out of the great entrance-hall a long, narrow room ran to the north turret. There the

Seigneur sat himself down and waited the result of the search with what patience he might ; nor was his men's diligence unrewarded. In an upper room they found three women, two in utter fear, and one in no fear at all—a well-grown, slender slip of a girl with a pale face and angry gray eyes, and who met them with a kind of stern contempt, asking :

‘ What brigand's work is this, breaking into my father's house ?’

These they brought to Beaufoy, and were quickly sent about their business.

‘ I set ye not to seek women, but a man,’ he said curtly. ‘ As for the girl, let her bide by the window there, and these two with her.’

For an hour he sat by the table, throwing a word or two to Marmontel from time to time ; then, one by one the searchers returned, shame-faced and empty-handed. The cunning of Jean de la Tour had been too much for them.

‘ There was no breaking away at the rear,’ said Marmontel. ‘ Besides, I know the man ; he would die like a rat in its hole ; he is, therefore, somewhere within the walls. With a smooth stick and a yard of whipcord, now ’—and he looked across at the group by the window—‘ we might——’

‘Hold thy peace!’ answered the Seigneur sternly. ‘When did Beaufoy war on women? In all courtesy, demoiselle’—and he rose as he spoke—‘I would have a word with you.’

‘Then it will be the first courtesy Beaufoy has shown La Tour,’ replied she tartly; ‘so, in all courtesy, let it be brief.’

‘What would you have?’—and he shrugged his shoulders. ‘Men cannot war with perfumed essences or fools’ baubles, nor yet with tongues, like women.’ He stood silent a moment, and drummed his fingers on the table like a man thinking deeply. ‘Thou art Jean de la Tour’s daughter?’

‘I am Agathe, daughter of Jean, Count de la Tour.’

‘Ay, ay; a Count of Gascony.’

‘A Count of Gascony is the better of any Seigneur in Angoumois.’

‘The better, but not the match’—and the Seigneur laughed sourly. ‘To-day proves that. Truly thou art thy father’s daughter. Hast thou sister?—brother?’

‘Neither one nor other.’

‘What kindred, then?’

‘None here, Seigneur, or Raimond de Beaufoy might not have been within La Tour’s

walls to-day. In Gascony, perhaps; but—but——'

'Ay, ay; I understand. There is a feud, and not one would have crooked a finger to keep Beaufoy from where he is. No uncommon thing that in France, but it clears the way.'

Again he stood silent, gnawing his underlip, his gaze wandering slowly from the girl to the table by which he stood. Suddenly he straightened himself and looked her full in the face.

'Thy father—what thinkest thou? Is he alive or dead? Answer with circumspection; for if he be alive, needs must that we find him, though we burn the place about his ears; if he be dead, or it is in doubt, that is another matter. I have no mind to make Beaufoy the poorer by a stout castle, and the richer by a blackened ruin. Which?'

It was plain that the question was like the stroke of a whip upon her flesh, for she first went pale, then red as fire.

'Think,' said Beaufoy softly—'think well. Whatever you say I abide by.'

'I'—she caught his eyes, stammered, and looked down upon the floor—'I—I—cannot tell. Since the fight I have not seen him alive'

—and, drawing a long breath, she flashed a look up eagerly at Beaufoy.

‘Then’—and the Seigneur dropped his words very slowly, one by one—‘for all thou knowest, he is dead?’

‘For all I know,’ answered she, fetching a sigh that shook her as the wind a bush—‘for all I know, he is dead.’

‘So’—and he turned to Marmontel—‘that ends the matter. Let there be no more search.’

Then he beckoned him to come near, and for a brief space the two stood in earnest talk.

‘Thou hast thy orders,’ Beaufoy said at length. ‘See to it that no time is lost. I give thee two hours, no more. Now be gone. Some of you there seek out bread and meat; our hostess and I would dine. Thou art not hungry?’ he went on as the girl made a gesture of dissent. ‘Well, well, grief is a great slayer of appetite. Now, I, I thank the Lord, am famished, and know it.’

While he dined he talked, and when he had finished eating he talked, a great flask of Burgundy wine at his left elbow. A medley of broken tales, legends of Beaufoy, memories of dead women; a courteous flow of words, suave and smooth, but never once might Agathe de la Tour or her women quit the room. At last

there was the thud of hoof-beats on the turf, and the loom of half a dozen men riding by in a bunch.

‘On my word, Marmontel has made good haste,’ he said, following the figures with his eyes as they swept past, ‘or fair company makes a short hour.’

Presently the door was opened from without and the squire appeared, followed by a Franciscan friar in his gray frock, over whose shoulder peered the cunning eyes and animal face of Peter the goatherd.

‘Shut the door and keep it fast,’ said Beaufoy, pushing the wine-flagon from him and rising to his feet. Then he stood thinking, drumming his finger-tips as before, while the group by the window eyed the group by the door, all marvelling what would happen next.

‘Friar,’ he went on at last, ‘our good friend Jean de la Tour is, as we believe, dead; and the demoiselle his daughter has none of her race nearer than Gascony. ’Tis sorrowful—most sorrowful—to be thus orphaned; and, failing kin, I, the Suzerain of Beaufoy, must play guardian and comforter. So far is clear. Clear also it is that I must put her in safe keeping, for the times are troublous, as one may see in the hall without.’

‘There is the Convent of Our——’ began Friar Mark as the Seigneur fell silent, but he got no further.

‘Ta, ta, ta, ta! To send such a face as that to a nunnery were a fool’s work. No, no; let the girl be wed. Stand forth, Peter the goat-herd, for on the word of Beaufoy thou shalt have her.’

Shambling in his walk, Peter pushed his lumbering frame to the front. The terror of the past hours had told upon him, and the unwholesome skin of his flabby cheeks hung in folds; but now he stiffened himself to a bolder front, and his narrow eyes were keenly alert with the furtive watchfulness of a wild beast. The thing was a jest, no doubt, but who was he to balk the Seigneur’s humour? Besides, when the Seigneur jested, surely a man’s neck was safe.

‘A pretty figure of a man!’ said Beaufoy grimly, and eyeing him as if he were a scabbed cur. ‘Wilt thou have her to wife, rascal? Speak, man, and do thy courtesy, or by St. Francis! Marmontel shall prick thee into words with his dagger. What? silent? Well, words go for little. Friar, do thou thy part, and quickly. Beaufoy has need of me.’

‘But,’ said the monk, hesitating in his sore

quandary, 'the damsel, perhaps, is unwilling?'

'But I am willing,' cried Beaufoy; 'and that ends it.'

So suddenly had the thing been sprung upon them, that at the first neither Agathe de la Tour nor the goatherd grasped Beaufoy's meaning; but as it dawned upon the man's brain that this freak had a core of earnest, he advanced towards the girl with outstretched arms and a broad laugh upon his great mouth

'Thou,' she cried, 'thou? Keep back, beast. If this is a jest, Seigneur de Beaufoy, end it.'

'No jest, by St. Francis!' answered Beaufoy. 'And the end is, thou shalt marry him.'

'If he so much as touch me, I shall kill him.'

'That is thy affair and his, but when I ride hence I leave six men behind me, lest the dead arise.'

'But'—and her voice ran up quavering and shrill, as she flung out a hand, pointing at the goatherd—'it cannot, it cannot be. That thing—that—that——'

'Can it not!' said Beaufoy coldly, 'but I say it can be, and will.'

'If my father were here——'

'Ay, but he is dead.'

'It is an infamy, an infamy!' she cried.

‘You—who did not war on women! You—to take so pitiful a vengeance! Hear me. By Holy Mary, if that wretch so much as fouls me with a finger-tip, I’ll kill him!’

‘Again I say that is his affair. What thinkest thou of thy bride, goatherd?’

‘That I’ll tame her, Seigneur, never fear;’ and he made as if to catch her by the arm.

But Beaufoy’s mood had changed.

‘Stand back, churl, and bide thy time,’ he cried sternly, as the girl shrank from the stretched-out hands; ‘she is still a demoiselle de la Tour. As for the taming, I have my doubts, but for the third time I say that is thy affair. Do thou thy part, priest.’

It was a strange ceremony. The man, between terror and uncertainty, knew not which way to turn, and stood shuffling his feet and muttering and murmuring to himself as he plucked at his ragged beard. The girl, drawn to the furthest angle of the window, was standing bolt upright and breathing hard through her shut teeth, but speaking never a word. Near the two stood the friar, his face full of the trouble of his spirit, and, save for his voice, there was a very great silence.

But the silence was not for long. From behind Beaufoy there came the grind and creak



"The girl shrunk from the stretched-out hands."

of warped woodwork moving grudgingly in unaccustomed grooves. A panel in the wall was painfully pushed aside, and in the space appeared Jean de la Tour.

‘A miracle!’ cried the Seigneur, ‘a miracle!’ and he broke into a laugh. ‘Friar, thy ministrations have raised the dead, and if Paul the Second does not canonize thee, thou hast lost thy due! Seize him, two of you, and hold him fast. Now, priest, the bride awaits thee.’

‘No, no, no!’ cried La Tour. ‘Your trap has caught me; let the bait go free. And listen, Beaufoy, no man of mine laid hand upon your churl.’

‘What? Faith of a gentleman, La Tour?’

‘Faith of a gentleman, Beaufoy.’

‘Then, by St. Francis! I had been richer by two men if you had spoken sooner. Fasten your loose ends, priest, and quickly. At present the girl is no more than three parts Madame le Chevrier. Finish, I say!’

‘Beaufoy, Beaufoy, it would be an infamy! Why, man——’

‘Put a hand upon his mouth, one of you. For the last time, priest, finish, I say! I have sworn to Peter the goatherd, and I hold to my oath.’

Again there was a silence, and across it the

halting, broken voice of the monk. Then it too ceased, and all was still as a tomb.

‘Marmontel,’ said the Seigneur softly, but so that all might hear, ‘have yon goatherd out and hang him, as I swore this morning, so that men may know the justice of Beaufoy.’

VII

HOW BEAUFOY CURED THE MAD- NESS OF MESNIL

THRICE during the lifetime of Raimond, Seigneur de Beaufoy, was the Suzerainty smitten by a calamity that was not of war.

Once it was famine, once it was plague, and once it was the terror of superstition ; and, grievous as were the first and the second, they were as a summer storm is to a winter's tempest compared with the third. Hunger and the fear of death drew men together, and bound the high and low by bonds of sympathy and help ; but the unknown terror sowed suspicion between friend and friend, rent asunder tenderest relationships, and set vassal and lord in a sharp antagonism.

In the face of famine Raimond de Beaufoy had made common cause with Beaufoy's people, remitting taxes, emptying granaries, and controlling doles in which he himself took no more

than a man's share until the grinding necessity passed, and the whole heart of the Suzerainty warmed to the lord that shared the sorrows and losses of his people.

The pestilence which swept the Seigneurie in '52—the year before the fight of Castillon put an end to the English wars—had reaped its harvest chiefly in the villages, setting a precedent which Paris and the towns of the Ile de France followed fourteen years later, when, in two summer months, forty thousand fell to the swing of the sickle. If here, again, Beaufoy's people had full cause to bless the love and labour of their Seigneur, Raimond de Beaufoy had his own reason to find a kernel of good in the bushel of evil, since out of the horrors of plague and the darkness of mourning he won his wife, as has been already told.

It was in 1484, the year the Estates met at Tours, that the blight fell upon Beaufoy. The spring had been late and broken, a vicious blaze of sunshine alternating with biting frosts, so that the vineyards and the corn-land had alike suffered. In June a cloud-burst set the rivers aflood, so that the water stood knee-deep in the hamlets on their banks, and the lower-lying pastures became a rotting morass. In July a thunderbolt struck the church of St. Francis of

Beaufoy and shattered its belfry, and later in the same month the caving in of a quarry crushed three men of Charnex into a grim parody of humanity. In August the mildew corrupted the poor remnants of the frosted vineyards, and an ergot devoured the weak ears of corn. In September a murrain seized upon sheep and cattle, and byre and field were swept with the besom of death. Strange sicknesses, or what to credulous ignorance seemed strange, broke out in every village, and from April to late autumn the months were punctuated by accident and fatality.

No one of these disasters was strange to Beaufoy. Blight, storm, sickness, and sudden death were old enemies, but all focussed on one bitter summer overbore reason, and so it came that from whispers men in their terror called aloud 'Witchcraft!' and the Suzerainty was in a ferment of unrest and suspicion.

From the peasants it spread to the Château.

'A pack of fools, Marmontel!' said Beaufoy wrathfully. 'Did lightning never blaze in Angoumois before?'

'Ay, Seigneur; but to kill a priest'—and the squire shook his head solemnly—'that truly was the work of the devil.'

'And since when have you been so fond of

a monk?' scoffed his master. 'Why, man, I have known you threaten to hang one in his own girdle; and you would have done it, too, had I but nodded. Does a gray frock charm a man, forsooth, that a thunderbolt shall not harm him? A pack of fools, I say again—a pack of fools!'

'But, Seigneur, look at the corn and wine——'

'I would to the Lord we could! Now, that is serious. A monk, more or less, we could spare, but scant bread and spoilt drink hit us sorely.'

'Did I not say so?' cried Marmontel, pressing forward in his eagerness. 'It is witchcraft, Seigneur, and until fire has swept Beaufoy there will be no man safe.'

'Tush!'—and Raimond de Beaufoy beat his hand on the table by which he sat. 'Was it witchcraft four years back when the wheat rotted in the wet? Was it witchcraft or a May frost the year before when the vines went black in a night? Was it witchcraft or a fool's choice of a site that drowned Bourjeu in the river's overflow? Was it witchcraft—— But there, a pack of fools, brainless as hares! As for fire, I know what you would be at, Marmontel: you would have me set stake and pile faggot, and so

burn incense to the devil. But I'll have none of that, and the man who takes the law into his own hands must deal with Raimond de Beaufoy. By the Lord, he'll sup sorrow for his pains! You and they have gone crazed, Marmontel; but I have medicine will cure you all, and that you had better tell them. When the plague swept us, there was no way of staying the terror in the quaking wretches save the way that Madame, my wife, took; and may God remember it to her in His mercy, as I have no doubt He has, and will; for when they saw a white-faced woman go amongst them as tranquil and calm as if she did no more than her house duties in the midst of her maids, they took heart in their shame, and so a frail woman saved Beaufoy. But this is a new terror, and needs a new cure, and, by St. Francis! I know the medicine, and will deal it out in no small doles. Rod and cord and branding-iron for the good of their souls—these, friend Marmontel, are the drugs that Beaufoy needs to purge its terror and madness, and, the saints helping me, purged by these it shall be, if needs must.'

'But, Seigneur, the witchcraft——'

'Is of your own making. Get you gone now and warn them. What I have set my oath to I will do, for all my threescore and nine years.'

‘Ay,’ said Marmontel in his beard as he tramped away from the justice-room, across the broad hall, and down the corridor to his quarters; ‘but, by reason of those same nine-and-sixty years, the Seigneur knows less of Beaufoy and its temper than I do. ’Tis a pity the Sieur François is away earwigging the young King. He would do more for the Suzerainty here on the spot than he will in Paris. A plague upon Paris! a plague on the Seigneur’s temper! a plague upon this devil’s work abroad! a plague on the Lord knows what all!’

But though he gnawed his moustache in his vexation, he spoke no word aloud, for Beaufoy’s men had a wholesome fear of the wrath and justice of their master.

Four days later the storm broke.

‘I am your man, Seigneur,’ said Marmontel, with a sullen look on his face that was not wont to be there. ‘For seven generations, or, maybe, eight, I and mine have served you and yours; and so, though I think the folk are right, I tell you there is bad work over at Mesnil. Mind, I say again, I think the folk are right; but if there was a burning at Mesnil and you not told, you would say I was no true servant to Beaufoy.’

The Seigneur was seated under the shadow of the great oak that grew to the south of the justice-room, and as he looked out into the breathless swelter of the sun, he had no mind to face the heat.

‘What!’ said he, ‘has a cow slipped its calf, or another barrel of ale gone sour? Wait till the cool, Marmontel.’

‘It is murder, Seigneur,’ answered the Squire curtly; ‘and murder’s still murder in Beaufoy, whether it be for hate, greed, or witchcraft.’

‘Murder—and at Mesnil?’ and Beaufoy straightened himself in his chair. ‘Come,’ he went on sternly, ‘is this not more of your fool’s terror?’

‘Am I afraid for the killing of a babe?’ said Marmontel with a fine contempt. ‘I trow not. But the folk at Mesnil are wild, and Jean Troyes is wildest of all. Can a man blame him? A son born to him two weeks ago, after fifteen years of prayers, and now made away with, unbaptized. My faith, Seigneur, if, thirty years ago, one had laid hands on the little Sieur——’

‘What! On a Beaufoy?’

‘For that’—and Marmontel laughed bitterly—‘flesh is flesh, and blood’s blood. The poor at least are akin to the rich in the love of

father and child. The Mesnil folk are men and women as well as we.'

'And what of Troyes' lad?'

'Last night he was there; this morning the father left mother and babe asleep, and when she woke he was gone, and without a trace. Gone, Seigneur—a two weeks' babe. What is that but witchcraft?'

For a moment Beaufoy was staggered, and, as the vague terror that was abroad in the land seized him, his face went as white as his peaked beard. Then he rallied.

'They have searched?'

'Oh, ay,' answered Marmontel grimly, 'wherever a two weeks' babe could hide himself, but they found nothing. Marie Bische took care of that.'

'Marie Bische?'

'Marie Bische, Seigneur. Listen,' and Marmontel ticked his points off on his fingers. 'Four months ago, Theuret, the miller, gave her short weight and she cursed him. The mill-dam burst, and left naught behind it but the great grindstones. In June, Gillem, the waggoner, drank her wine, and would pay naught. She cursed him, and three weeks after he was drowned at the ford. They say he was in liquor, but what of that? He is dead. Five

days ago, Friar Hugues rebuked her, and sharply, too, that she never went to confession. Friar Hugues is dead of a thunderbolt. Yesterday the woman Troyes cried out upon her for a witch, and to-day the woman Troyes is childless. Is not all that witchcraft? Small wonder Mesnil is wild! Well, God be praised, she'll work no more wickedness!

‘How?’

‘Because,’ said Marmontel coolly, and looking up at the sun to reckon the hour as he spoke, ‘she is hanged by this. They dared not burn her lest it take too much time.’

‘And you,’ cried Beaufoy furiously, ‘have held me here in talk of a set purpose! By St. Francis——’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Marmontel. ‘Swear naught, Seigneur, swear naught! I told you the folk were right.’

‘Pray God they may still think so when I am done with them!’ answered Beaufoy between his teeth. ‘And for you, if you hope for forgiveness, see that we are on the road in ten minutes.’

The narrow byway which made up the one dirty street of Mesnil was in a ferment, and even the unlooked-for and unwelcome presence of the Seigneur, with ten men at his back, did

no more than quell in part the uproar. From a dozen jostling groups came the babble of many tongues, with here and there a woman's shrill voice screaming high above the conflict of words. No one gave heed to the other, and all emulously pushed, chattered, and cried in the useless endeavour to secure an audience.

At the clatter of hoofs, the tumult slackened and the groups drew together, as if to gain strength by numbers. No one spoke aloud, but the crowd whispered and muttered as it surged in the jaws of the dusty street, and the looks that met Beaufoy were both sullen and defiant.

For his part, he had no thought either to conciliate or to temporize, and came straight to the point. Halting three paces from the crowd, he faced it sternly.

'No lying now, fools! Where is Marie Bische?'

Then indeed there was a silence, and the eyes that had met his were turned aside. It is easier to do a fellow to death in heat than tell of it in cold blood, and for answer they stared at one another and were dumb. Besides, whoever spoke might have to bear the brunt of the act of all.

'You had tongues enough to wake the dead

five minutes back, and to use them now will be your wisdom. Where is Marie Bische?’

Then that happened which nine times out of ten happens in a mixed crowd—a woman answered, and, though she spoke from behind and in concealment, it was a woman’s courage, and not a man’s.

‘Tongues, sure enough, Raimond de Beaufoy, but not tongues that could wake Marie Bische, the witch. As to where she is, ride on and find her, for she’s plain to be seen.’

‘Go thou, Marmontel,’ said the Seigneur curtly.

Then he sat back in his saddle, and the two groups faced one another, silent, in the sunlight.

Round between the houses went the squire in haste. He knew Beaufoy well, and the set hardness of his face frightened him. Had he been hot with wrath, there would have been hope for the men of Mesnil, since, even in his anger, reason would move the Seigneur. Here there was no anger, and so the mood was dangerous. More than that, Marmontel knew the people as few knew them, and to him they were so much stubble waiting a spark to set the blaze roaring. Let Beaufoy strike in his present mood, and the spark would fall.

Under five minutes he was back again, and, save for the shuffle of feet in the dust and the rattle of steel bits as the horses tossed their heads amongst the crowds of flies that worried them, there had been silence.

‘Well? Briefly now.’

‘Dead, Seigneur. I told you how it would be. You can see the top of the oak above the thatch there to the left.’

‘Take four of these slayers of women and bind them. Men, I mean, though I doubt not the women did their part. Trust a woman to spite a woman. Four, and neither pick nor choose. For Beaufoy’s sake, I cannot hang all Mesnil, so four will suffice. Now, hearken! So sure as there is no witchcraft in this thing, you four hang. By St. Francis of Beaufoy, I set my oath to that! Where is the house of this Jean Troyes? Babes of even no more than two weeks’ age cannot slip out of the world and leave no trace behind. Two of you guard these fellows, and, for your own sakes, guard them well. The rest follow.’

To the right there was a broad stretch of pasture-land, seared into a brown crispness by the strong August heat. Across this rode Beaufoy, led by half a dozen of the villagers and followed by his troop, with the rest of Mesnil

straggling at their horses' heels. An oak, a chestnut, or an elm broke the level of the grass, with here and there a thicket where a small underwood of hazels and beech was bound into a tangle by a thick growth of brambles. In the shelter of one of these was a thatched hut.

'See,' said one of the women over her shoulder, and pointing ahead with a lean arm, 'Jean Troyes lives there.'

For answer, Beaufoy nodded, and, without halt, the troop moved forward. Once at the hut-door, there was a pause and a scattering. Mesnil had done the Seigneur's will, but Mesnil had no interest in the result ; the thing was witchcraft, and so the interest of Mesnil was under an oak half a league away.

'Now,' said Beaufoy, dismounting, 'search ! Two of you take the house in hand ; the rest spread and make a cast in a circle, widening the circuit with each round,' and he turned into the hut.

At the door he met Jean Troyes and his wife, their faces stolid and expressionless. Amid the hard necessities of a peasant's life there was no room for violent joys or sorrows, or, if they were there, the expression of them did not come easy. Where the stomach is

importunate, its cries drown the insistences of the passions.

In reply to the Seigneur the tale was told by the man briefly enough, boldly even in its curt-ness—the woman standing by him while he spoke.

‘So,’ said Beaufoy when he finished, ‘you left the two asleep, the mother and child. Within an hour of going out to the sheep you were back, and the boy was missing. How far is the nearest water?’

‘A well, Seigneur?’

‘No, a river.’

‘A league, Seigneur, a league, no less; for, see you, the streams are dried, and——’

‘Ay, I know. That settles it. Be at ease, mother; the little lad is not far off.’

As if to prove him a prophet, at that moment Marmontel came panting in, a pitiful tiny bundle of coarse but clean linen cloth in his hands; and at the sight of it the woman gasped and staggered, clinging to Jean Troyes for support.

‘It was in the thicket, Seigneur, laid away amongst the dry bracken, and——’

‘Ay, ay, ay!’ said Beaufoy, with his hard eyes on the mother. ‘I guessed something of the sort. Lay it on the settle yonder and get

you gone. Shut the door behind you, and see to it that those gaping fools keep their distance.' Then, as the door closed more softly than was the squire's wont, he cried, 'Ho! Marmontel! you heard my oath anent those four? Aye? Then do justice.'

'But, Seigneur'—and Marmontel halted, half within and half without, so that through the slant in the door the sunlight above his head streamed in on the linen bundle—'there is danger, and I would advise——'

But Beaufoy rounded on him with a snarl:

'Who art thou to advise? Do thou as thou art bid, lest the four be made five.'

And, knowing Raimond de Beaufoy as he did, Marmontel slipped out into the sunlight very quietly and with a white face.

'Hearken!' said the Seigneur to the two who were left, but with his eyes on the woman rather than on the man. 'Of evil intent in this I acquit you both; and you, Jean Troyes, I acquit of all knowledge, good or bad. Now, dame, tell your tale, and this time let it be the truth. So far you have lied, and five have died, or are dying, for the lie—though, for that matter, the four will get their deserts and no more. Again, I say, the truth!'

For a moment she stood silent, breathing

hard, and her hands clenching and unclenching in her trouble of spirit. Then she dropped on her knees, but not to the Seigneur. Gripping Jean Troyes by the arm, she buried her face in his rough sleeve and fell a-sobbing.

‘I had no thought of evil to another,’ she said between her sobs, ‘only—only—I feared to lose your love. You were so bound to the little lad. I loved him too. For fifteen years I yearned for a babe, and God knows I loved him; but you were dearest, and my heart was sore lest you would hate me.’

Lifting her head, she looked up at him, dry-eyed, but her mouth worked as if with a palsy, and her fingers plucked and fondled his sleeve in her agony of loss and apprehension. On his part, from his six feet of height Jean Troyes looked down at her stolidly. This passion was a thing beyond his comprehending, and her words touched his dull wit but slightly. Not so with Beaufoy. His face darkened, and it was with hot wrath in his eyes that he turned upon her.

‘What?’ he cried; ‘you killed the babe lest it come betwixt the father’s love and——’

‘No, no, no!’ she screamed. ‘Never believe it, Jean. I overlaid the child, and dared not tell you the truth. Never the other, never

the other. You believe me, Jean, you believe me?’

‘Oh, ay, I believe you,’ he answered heavily; ‘but it’s the Seigneur’s mercy we’re not all hanged for your foolishness.’

Whereat she broke out weeping in earnest, and fell to mumbling his hand, as a dog might. Half an hour later, when Beaufoy rode once more into Mesnil, the crowd was still there, though not, as before, massed in the roadway, but gathered in four separate groups about as many doors, because of the mourning within. Midway between these were his men, silent and sullen. Their sympathies lay with the townsfolk, and but for discipline, self-interest and a wholesome fear, Raimond de Beaufoy would that hour have had a revolt upon his hands. Even as it was, a murmur of hate and wrath greeted him from these four centres as he drew bridle.

‘Is all done as I bade?’ he said curtly to Marmontel, heeding the peasants not at all. ‘Then let us ride on; but not to Beaufoy, lest these fools think we fear them, and fly for shelter.’

So out of the further end of the village they rode at a slow trot, and on for a mile or two towards Grandfrai. Then the Seigneur curved

round to the left, and took his way leisurely back to the Château. Presently he called Marmontel.

‘Tell me of this Marie Bische, who was she?’

‘A widow, Seigneur, and until these things—that is, until—I mean, she was accounted harmless enough. She lived yonder;’ and he pointed ahead to a hamlet that lay by the river’s bank on the left, and a scant half-league from Mesnil. ‘She had one daughter, Jeanne, who six months ago married Pierre Lange, and all three dwelt together. Folks say that between mother and daughter there was but little to choose, and that for these weeks past Jeanne has gone as one who dreamed dreams, that she shuns the neighbours, and sits in corners mouthing to herself.’

‘Saints give me patience!’ cried the Seigneur testily. ‘Has Beaufoy gone mad? If there were no such witches in France, God help the generation to come! But look, Marmontel, yonder to the left; what fresh folly is this?’

They had forded the river and ridden up the slope which further on led to the Château. Now, as Beaufoy turned in his saddle and pointed to the cluster of houses where had lived the unhappy Marie Bische, it was clear there was some excited stir afoot. The river-bank

was thronged, and through the quick shiftings of the crowd they could see a woman being dragged to the water's edge. Then there was a pause, an instant's struggle, and a scream as the poor wretch was flung headlong into the current.

'By St. Francis, it is Jeanne Lange!' cried Beaufoy. 'The mother first and now the daughter. Ride, fellows, ride! I would not have her drown for the Seigneurie itself.'

Down the slope they cantered, and, fast as they rode, the black ball that swung so helplessly in the current came well-nigh as fast to meet them, while along the further bank ran the crowd, keeping pace with its victim and shouting curses as it ran.

'Let her be!' they cried, as they came abreast of the horsemen. 'Let her be! 'Tis her due and no more, for she has confessed.'

But Beaufoy never halted. Gripping the saddle hard with his knees, he gave his beast the spur and plunged in a dozen yards below the drowning woman, and, swimming into mid-stream, waited for her.

'Your hand! For the Lord's sake, your hand!' he shouted as she came near.

But the white face rolled under as he spoke, and he had scant time to catch her by the skirts

as she swept past. After that it was no more than a stout horse's work to find the bank, and in five minutes she was gasping for breath on the dry turf, wet as a draggled hay-wisp, but none the worse. Then it was plain why the Seigneur's cry had gone unheeded: her hands were bound fast by the thumbs behind her back, so fast that the flesh stood level with the cord.

A frail slip of a girl she was, for all her wifehood, and looked the frailer for the close clinging of her sodden garments. Her hair had come unbound in the struggle and was wisped in wet tangles about her face, so that, as she stood in the sunlight, whimpering, she looked like some water-pixie dragged out unwillingly to the solid earth.

'Off with you, Marmontel, and cut the cords!' said Beaufoy. 'Witch forsooth! She's but a half-grown child! Look at her mouthing her swollen thumbs, just like a babe!'

'But, Seigneur,' answered Marmontel, slipping his dagger back into its sheath, 'she confessed. Hear them clamouring yonder.'

The Squire was right. Clamouring they were, and could words have killed, there would have been an end to the reign of Raimond de Beaufoy. But the clamour was not merely curses

and threatening, but the sharp insistence that the woman had indeed confessed.

‘Ay, ay, I hear!’ said the Seigneur. ‘What of this confession, woman?’

Then the white face flamed red, and, ceasing her whimpers, Jeanne Lange pressed forward to Beaufoy’s knee.

‘It is true, Seigneur,’ she whispered under her breath, and stammering as she spoke. ‘It is true I said so, and yet it was a lie. Look at them, the brute beasts! I am a woman, and they would have searched me for the witch-mark openly and in God’s light—me, a woman! Could I face the shame of it? Better drown than that; so I lied.’

‘By St. Francis of Beaufoy, a brave wench, and a good lie!’ he cried. ‘Do you hear, fellows? A brave wench, I say, and had I a daughter she would have done no less in a like case. Have her up behind you, Marmontel, and set her in charge of the castle maids with all haste. To-morrow’—and leaning back in his saddle, he shook his fist towards the howling mob—‘to-morrow I will settle with these scum. A brave wench! God send Beaufoy a hundred more such witches!’

But as they rode up the slope, Marmontel thought in his heart that the reckoning between

Mesnil and its lord might come sooner than the Seigneur counted upon, and after a different manner than he supposed. When the madness of terror is added to sore hearts and hot blood, he would be a rash man who set a limit to the risks.

And Marmontel was right in his forebodings. Dusk had no more than half fallen when the guard that kept watch by the tower that overlooked the great gate in the outer circuit of walls sent in hot haste for the Squire, with such news that he, in turn, sought his master, breathless and as near terror as was in his nature.

‘All Beaufoy’s afoot!’ he cried, breaking in on the Seigneur with scant ceremony. ‘Not Mesnil alone, but Beaufoy from east to west; and what can we do with our dozen men-at-arms? The slope is black with them.’

But it took more than a threat of siege to move the Seigneur. At nine-and-sixty the fires have cooled, and it takes a strong blast to set them glowing. The natural forces, too, are abated, and after such a day as he had passed, small wonder if Beaufoy’s nerves and muscles were alike slack.

‘Chut!’ said he. ‘A handful of peasants with their bellies full of sour wine! What can they do, poor fools?’

‘A handful of peasants!’ echoed Marmontel. ‘By my faith, Beaufoy’s men have shown before this what a handful of peasants were worth when their blood was hot! Am I a coward, Seigneur, to be frightened by a handful of peasants? But this is serious, for they have their womenfolk with them, and even a rabbit will fight when the doe looks on. And here are we, short-handed, with half our men playing fool in Paris at the heels of the young Sieur. We must make terms, Seigneur, and promptly, or Beaufoy burns, that’s sure.’

‘Terms?’ cried the Seigneur sharply, a world of scorn in his voice. ‘Terms? What terms, babbler?’

‘There is the wench——’ began Marmontel, and as he spoke he had the grace to grow shamefaced, and the discretion to look aside. But he got no further than the four words when the Seigneur stopped him with a gesture, plain even to his discreetness.

‘Look you,’ said he, leaning across the table at which he sat, and speaking very slowly, ‘I would not give up a hair of her head to these rogues to save Beaufoy root and branch. What, man! She is my guest, and, by St. Francis, a guest is safe at Beaufoy, whether crowned King or helpless wench! You mean well,

Marmontel, so I pardon you ; but a nicer sense of what fits with Beaufoy's honour would mend the future. Now, keep your wits clear. How many are there ?

'It is hard to guess, Seigneur. There are scores here and scores there, and they flit about like rabbits in a warren ; but there are enough.'

'Armed ?

'Peasant fashion, Seigneur—sickles, scythes, flails, with here and there a pike. But these go for naught—they threaten fire.'

'There are women, you say ?

'Ay, Seigneur, and worse than the men in their ravings. There are the wives of those four——'

Beaufoy nodded.

'I know. My conscience is easy there ; they got their deserts. Once let lawlessness spread in the Seigneurie, and there would be more than four widows set wailing. As for the women, they have my pity, for to them come the struggle and sorrow. I know enough. Let us go to the gate.'

Lifting his sword from the table, Beaufoy buckled it on in silence, and spoke no more until they were midway across the space that lay between the Château and the outer walls.

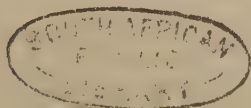
Then he paused and laid his hand on the other's shoulder.

'If evil comes of this night's work, and you live through it, say this to François, my son: "Deal gently with these poor folk; they cannot see as we see, and are mad with terror and loss, else Beaufoy's walls had never heard what they hear now. Let him shed as little blood as may be, and show love and mercy rather than a hard rule." I, perhaps, have been rough at times, and it is borne in upon me that what I forget God Almighty keeps in mind. You understand? Tut, tut! why should a man whinge like a girl? Hark to the wretches! They howl like a pack of wolves with a deer at bay!'

'What can touch you that does not touch me, Seigneur?' cried Marmontel, with a shake in his voice, 'and what am I and mine here for but that you and yours may live?'

'Remember, nevertheless,' answered Beaufoy, and strode onward to the great gate.

There he halted; and when he cried in his stern arrogance, 'Get you back fifty paces, all of you, while I come without!' the habit of obedience was so strong that the tide of wrath rolled backward down the slope, and the mob kept its ground below like a wild beast straining on its



chain, but curbed back by the strength of the links.

Bidding the guard unlock a postern and close it fast behind him again, Beaufoy went two yards forward alone, and then paused. So for the time the two stood silent, the mob and the one man facing it, silent except for mutterings and that subtle, nameless sound that always comes from numbers. In spite of their widely differing strength, each knew and respected the other's powers. It was the man who spoke first.

‘My children——’

But from the mass below, black and solid in the quick growth of the night, there came back a sharp snarl like the outcry of a kennel of hounds, and above the uproar a voice—a woman's voice—answered, clear and shrill, one word, and one only :

‘Hangman !’

‘Come back, Seigneur!’ cried Marmontel softly ; ‘come back and let us parley ; they mean murder !’

But Beaufoy gave no heed, or, if he heard, his answer was to go forward another ten paces down the slope. Then those behind him saw him fling his open hand up and hold it there commanding silence ; and when he spoke



... Do you take Kaimond de Beaufoy in quittance for Jeanne Lange?

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again, there was that in his voice compelling obedience. It was no longer the father to the children, but the master to the servants. For five, seven, ten minutes he went on ; and when he ceased, those who listened had heard the tale of false witchcraft, of Marie Bische and of Jeanne Lange, fully told.

‘ Now,’ cried he when he had made an end of the telling, ‘ hearken, you men ; for to you I speak, and not to these silly women, who understand reason no more than does a sheep. What is it you want that Beaufoy can give?’

From right and left, and here and there in the shadows of the crowd, came the answer : ‘ Jeanne Lange, the witch !’

‘ Women’s voices, every one,’ said Beaufoy, ‘ and, what is more, you know she is no witch. But I asked you, “ What can Beaufoy give ?” Beaufoy cannot give Jeanne Lange, for Jeanne Lange stands for Beaufoy’s honour. I and mine will die first. Answer, Beaufoy’s men !’

And a voice shrieked out of the darkness, ‘ Give yourself, murderer !’

‘ A woman again,’ said the Seigneur. ‘ Does she speak for you, Beaufoy’s men ? Do you take Raimond de Beaufoy in quittance for Jeanne Lange ? Good !’

Drawing his sword, he snapped it across his

knee and flung the halves behind him ; then he strode down the slope.

From below came the sudden buzz of many voices, and through the gloom the Seigneur could see the black mass of the crowd heave and sway in its agitation. Then it broke in the centre to let him pass, and closed in behind, thronging him ; but the hands that grasped him were friends' hands, and the arms flung about him were friends' arms, and the roar that filled the night was as of one voice, ' Long live Beaufoy !'

' My children, my children !' he cried ; ' now and always the children of my love !'

Thenceforward, if what the chronicler says be true, there was no more talk of witchcraft within the four corners of the Suzerainty. Beaufoy had cast it out the night he offered his life for that of Jeanne Lange.

BEAUFOY'S TOKEN

UPON all the hill-slopes that fell away from the stretch of level turf where stood the Château of Beaufoy, upon the fat cornfields and vigorous green vineyards, upon the dull circuit of woods that lay in the far, very far, distance, the May sunshine was gracious and gay. Even the gray walls, mossy with age towards the north and west, were smothered in brightness, against which the huge shadow of Beaufoy Oak fell in a sprawling black blur.

Beaufoy Oak was older than Beaufoy Castle by many a year, and yet the great pile dated back close on four centuries, to the time of Louis the Young. It stood to the south of the Château, and between it and the great circuit of walls which, gripping Beaufoy in mighty arms of stone, held their nursling safe against many a desperate assault. They were not always loved, these great lords who called themselves Sieurs of Mesnil and Counts of Charnex, and

but few generations passed in which they had not had to fight for bare life itself.

Doubtless, being who and what they were, they carried things with a high hand, their justice knowing little of mercy and much of revenge, but to their credit be it said they were this much better than their neighbours, in that they curbed their greed, seeking wealth neither by aggression against the strong nor by spoliation of the weak. Woe to the fox who held back from Beaufoy Beaufoy's rights! But equal woe to the wolf that harried Beaufoy's chickens! The Seigneur had a long arm, a longer memory, and a deadly patience. Sooner or later fox or wolf paid through his skin.

Where the black shadow of Beaufoy's Oak fell deepest and blackest were the long, narrow windows of the Justice-room, a dismal, sombre place, that was a fit stage for the scenes enacted upon its flags. Here it was Raimond de Beaufoy's custom to hold his court day by day, and here on this May morning in 1490 he listened to a tale that whipped even his age into a storm of wrath.

Charnex, from whence the Beaufoys drew their title of Count, had been harried in the night, and upon the nearest to his hand—

and his body-squire—the old Seigneur had let loose his wrath.

‘But, Seigneur,’ cried Marmontel, ‘is it my fault that Charnex is burnt?’

‘But, fool,’ cried back Raimond de Beaufoy furiously, ‘is it my fault? Must I play watchdog while you sleep?’ And he struck the haft of his dagger angrily on the oak table by which he sat, and glared up at the Squire.

‘By your leave, Seigneur, one minute. Last night——’

‘Last night?’ broke in the old Sieur. ‘Quit last night and come to this morning. To my men of Charnex last night and this morning are as far apart as life and death. Come to to-day, I say.’

‘To-day, Seigneur,’ answered Marmontel sullenly, ‘there are five widows in Charnex.’

‘Ay, five—five, and who killed my men, Marmontel, and where wert thou at the killing?’

‘If you would but listen, Seigneur. It was like this. Last night——’

‘The saints grant me patience with thee and thy last nights! There, go thy own way.’ And Beaufoy sprang to his feet and fell to pacing the flags, his white peaked beard wagging in his ill-suppressed wrath.

'Tis shorter so, Seigneur, for I and words have little acquaintance.'

'Ay, and thou and deeds less,' scoffed Beaufoy, 'or there had been fewer widows in Charnex.'

'Last night,' went on Marmontel, holding doggedly to his point, 'word came from Mesnil, seven leagues to the east, that——'

'That led thee on a shadow-hunt, while Charnex, two leagues to the west, was harried! Well, between the coward and the fool, I choose the fool. Hadst thou been poltroon, Marmontel, Beaufoy's Oak had borne fruit ere nightfall, for all that thee and thine have served me and mine for seven generations. Would to the Lord I had twenty years back, I would so misuse these widow-makers that all Angoumois would shiver at Beaufoy's vengeance as it did three-and-twenty years back. It grinds my very soul to be so broken and outworn. God! give me twenty years, twenty years!' and he smote his palms together in his passion.

'God grant us the young Sieur!' answered Marmontel bluntly. 'That prayer is more to the purpose.'

Raimond de Beaufoy halted abruptly in his wrath, and swung round furiously on the Squire.

'What?' he cried. 'You dare? You?

Listen to me. There are five lying dead there at Charnex, and I would not crook that finger to hold back François de Beaufoy from making a sixth with them. He sought to come to his own over-early, did François de Beaufoy, and, by the Lord! he learned who was Seigneur. Let him starve where he will; I am done with him! Now, Marmontel, as to Charnex?

‘As to Charnex,’ replied Marmontel, ‘I say again, had we the young Sieur back, there would be no need to talk of Charnex. You can kill me, Seigneur, but that’s the truth, and for my part I hold it was lies they told you, and the lad meant no more than to set his youth between your age and the troubles of such a heavy handful as Beaufoy is at times. Lies grow like a toadstool, Seigneur, and he who swallows them may look to be poisoned.’

‘As to Charnex, what happened was this: The beasts were housed, the folks abed, and Charnex as dark as a three-quarters moon would let it be, when some horsemen clattered in—a dozen say some, some twenty, others two score. You know how it is, Seigneur: the poor souls were wild with terror, and beyond counting. For my part I think there was a scant half-score. It was the beasts they were after, and not many of them—a few sheep and a bullock or two.

Would to the Lord they had let them go! it had been cheaper. But Charnex holds what Charnex has, so they made a fight for it, half dressed as they were, and ill-armed, and in the scuffle five poor fellows lay down who will never get up again. Then—how, none could tell me—a torch was flung in the straw of a byre, and in an hour half Charnex was burnt.'

'So? And which way did the rogues go?'

'To the north, Seigneur.'

'And not more than a dozen of them?'

'A scant half-score, Seigneur. I counted the horse-tracks.'

'But they may have split their party?'

'You called me a fool a while back, Seigneur, but I am not so great a fool as that. There were ten at the outside.'

'And how many have we in the castle?'

'Five times that, Seigneur; for since the young Sieur left you have doubled——'

'Ay, man, I know, I know. Ten followed at his heels, and the other dozen I flung out. I will have no traitors in Beaufoy. Saving thyself, Marmontel, there is not a soul in the castle who can say, "I knew François de Beaufoy." Send English Hugh to me, and then take a dozen fellows and do what thou canst for the rehousing of Charnex. As to the

dead, Charnex must see to their burying; for since my Lord Bishop of Grandfrai has taken umbrage at me for checking the exactions of his lazy monks, I will ask no service of him or his.'

'But the thieves, Seigneur?'

'Leave them to me,' answered Beaufoy grimly. 'Do thou as thou art bid, and send me English Hugh. Yet, stay; whose band was this? Since we hung Peter of the Red Hand and his six worthies I thought Beaufoy was free of rogues. What says Charnex?'

'Charnex stammers, Seigneur, and says naught, or else that it was dark, and it as fair a night as heart could wish, and in May, too. The truth is, they are but peasants, and were panic-stricken. As for myself, I know no more than that they came from the north and went to the north. Best let me see to them, Seigneur.'

But Beaufoy shook his head.

'No, no! Thou who art Beaufoy-born wilt deal more pitifully with the sorrows of Charnex than would another, and English Hugh can strike as hard as thou canst. Send him to me.'

Left alone, Beaufoy's pace slackened, and his beard went down upon his breast. The fires of passion had died out, and the ashes left behind were very bitter. Marmontel had

spoken the truth and the sting of the words lay in that they were the truth. Beaufoy was in sore need of its young *Sieur*. How could the withered energies of three-score years and ten, and five years more, cope with the brawlings within and the aggressions from without? To copy Marmontel's phrase, If Beaufoy were to hold what Beaufoy held, it would only be by the grip of a vigorous manhood. In very sober truth Beaufoy had sore need of the young *Sieur*.

Then, in face of his self-condemning, Beaufoy, as men will, pleaded justification. Was Beaufoy to be thrust aside in the affairs of Beaufoy? The boy—to the old man five-and-thirty was no more than a boy's age—the boy had taken too much upon him. There was no room at Beaufoy for two masters, and so he was best gone. Best gone? Ay! but what of himself? Was it not true that for Beaufoy's sake it were better that he himself were gone, and so make room? A good boy, for all his heat, a good boy; and a good day for Beaufoy when—— And in the middle of his bitter thought English Hugh came clanking in at the door.

A tall, clean-limbed, sinewy man was English Hugh, his eyes bold and hard, and his face smooth-shaven after the fashion of the times.

A resident these five years in France, he had left his country for reasons best known to himself and the laws ; a sturdy friend or a crafty foe, but all in the way of business. He held his life as so much capital, and so long as his gains were great, he cared little how high he speculated.

As the Englishman halted at the doorway the old Count stopped in his walk, and coming to the table, leaned across it, his palms upon the corners.

‘Thou hast been, I think, one year at Beaufoy?’

‘One year, Seigneur.’

‘Thou art going to have thy first serious commission ; see that it prove thee worth thy hire. Thou hast heard of the outrage at Charnex?’

‘I have heard, Seigneur.’

‘Good ! There are some half-score of the rogues, and they have nine hours’ start. But they have beasts and sheep to drive, and hard riding can do much. Do thou ride hard—ay, as if for thy life. Take twenty fellows with thee, and lose no time in the saddling.’

‘And the thieves, Seigneur?’

‘The thieves, fellow ? There be five dead at Charnex, and two lives for one is no more

than Beaufoy justice. Do thy duty ; rope or steel is all one to me. Yet '—and De Beaufoy paused in deep thought, drawing down his shaggy brows across the caverns of his eyes— ' wait, wait ; yes, that will do. Bring me as a token the right hand of the leader of the rogues. Now then, begone, and let Beaufoy's shame be wiped out ere nightfall.'

Later that day there came a visitor to the castle who met with a surly welcome, for all the old Count's solitude. Between Beaufoy and the Church there had never been much love. Monseigneur the Bishop and my Lord the Count had ambitions in common, and the field was too narrow to allow both their full play without collision. Each claimed precedence : Beaufoy as Suzerain under the King, Philip of Grandfrai as the representative of his Holiness Innocent VIII. It was power temporal pitted against power spiritual, and, as neither would give way, they jostled. These strained relations had been still further stretched by an act of the old Seigneur's, and Philip of Grandfrai waited without under the shadow of the oak in no temperate mood. Enter Beaufoy's door he would not.

A soldierly man was my Lord Bishop, with his sword braced high at his thigh—a soldierly

man, and with little about him from spurred heel to plumed hat to show the Churchman, save, perhaps, a certain chastened sobriety of attire. Six men-at-arms and two monks formed his escort, the latter barefooted and riding with their hoods flung back upon their shoulders.

‘Tell thy master, fellow,’ he said as he passed the guard at the outer gate lodge, ‘that the Bishop of Grandfrai desires speech with him.’

Then he turned aside, and riding under the shadow of the oak, waited.

‘Then let him come and speak,’ answered Beaufoy curtly when one brought him the message.

‘Tell Raimond de Beaufoy,’ said Philip sternly, ‘that though I am a man of peace, there are reasons well known to him why I, being who and what I am, will not cross his threshold.’

‘A man of peace, and he with six steel bonnets at his back! That is the sole peace Beaufoy may expect from one of his cloth.’ And the old Seigneur laughed mirthlessly. ‘Well, I will bate my dignity and go to the fellow, for the sake of being rid of him the sooner. Bide within, all of you, lest he think I go guarded. I care not a jot for him and all his.

‘A courteous host goes to meet his guest,’ he went on as, bareheaded, he approached the prelate, and speaking with but little courtesy in his tone. ‘Had I been as stiff as you, Monseigneur, there would have been little speech between us this day.’

‘Leave compliments aside,’ answered Philip of Grandfrai, ‘or if you have courtesy to spare, show some to my poor monks.’

‘So,’ cried the old Seigneur angrily, ‘that is the way the hawk flies? By St. Francis, I thought as much! If any showed your monks discourtesy, Lord Bishop, it was not with my goodwill. I bade Beaufoy’s folk keep Beaufoy’s goods for Beaufoy’s using, and that if a pack of lazy ne’er-do-works sought to lay hands upon them, to bid them begone—empty.’

‘What!’ cried the Bishop furiously, and forgetting the man of peace in the man of passion, ‘you would deny the Church its rights, cut off its tithes and dues, and bid us starve?’

‘No, Bishop, that I never said. Tithes and dues we will pay, seeing that all owe service to God and the King, and needs must that we be born and die; but robbery under the guise of tithes and spoliation in the name of dues I and mine will not endure. And to that word



" 'I'll ding your palace down about your ears.' "

Raimond de Beaufoy sets his oath. Is that plain, Bishop?

‘Seigneur, my monks sought but their rights ; and by the name of Him I serve, their rights they shall have. Spoliation and robbery there was none ; but by your vassals, Raimond de Beaufoy, there has been violence and well-nigh murder done, and I stand here in the face of God to claim justice on the evil-doers. Will you grant justice to me and my monks, Seigneur? Ay or nay ? For if you fail me I have my own methods, and by the Saints, they shall not fail ! Is that plain, Seigneur?’

‘Touch but one vassal of Beaufoy in wrath’—and in his passion the old Count shook his clenched hands in the Bishop’s face as he bent towards him from the saddle—‘touch but the hair of a Beaufoy’s man, and, by the Lord ! I’ll ding your palace down about your ears, for all your priestliness. Again I say, Is that plain, Bishop?’

As the Seigneur waxed hot so did the Churchman wax cold. Sitting back upon his beast, he met Beaufoy’s fierce looks with steady eyes.

‘Fie, fie !’ he said, with a calmness of contempt that was a fresh offence. ‘Fie, fie ! so old a man and so ungoverned ! ’Tis a pitiful thing when age learns no sobriety of passion.

Have you no fear, Seigneur de Beaufoy, of the justice of God, and you so near His bar ?'

'None, Lord Bishop, none.'

'Has His justice not already fallen on Beaufoy? Where is the young Sieur? Why is he a wanderer and a wastrel? Was it hate or justice drove him from his birthplace? Justice? Then he was at fault? I tell you, Raimond de Beaufoy, that God's justice has already in part fallen, and the sins of the father are punished by the sins of the son. Have you still no fear of the justice of God?'

'None, Lord Bishop, none. Let it fall on whom and when and where and how it may. Fear? Nay, Bishop, I invoke it.'

'Then let it fall,' said the other solemnly, and for a full minute he sat with his left hand raised above him, and looking sternly down into Beaufoy's wrathful face. Then, with a twist of his hand, he turned his horse towards the gateway. 'Come,' he said curtly, and rode off, leaving no word of farewell behind him.

With slow steps the old Seigneur returned to the Justice-room, and sat himself down. This strife of tongues had not gone off as triumphantly as he, in his pride, had looked for; and at the memory his dour, hard face was set in stern anger.

A chance shot of Philip of Grandfrai's had gone home. Was it hate or justice that had driven out young François from the home of his fathers? Hate? Not of the boy; no, no, for all his harshness Beaufoy loved the lad. Hate of his independence it might be, of that manhood in him which, pushing to the front, asserted itself in a fashion that angered the autocracy of three score and ten. He who for fifty years has been a king unto himself and all his world, is impatient of abdication, even when the need of it is roared into his ears by age and infirmity. Was it, then, after all, a kind of hate, a twist of a contemptible passion, that made the boy an outcast? If that were so, truly he had paid for his sin, and paid for it twice over that very day.

First, there was that affair of Charnex, a pitiful story, with its widows and orphans, its burnt and plundered homesteads—François might have saved all these. Then this feud with Philip of Grandfrai. A clear head and a calm tongue, with a timely politic concession—more words than acts—would have smoothed away Monseigneur's grumbling. Doubtless these fellows at Mesnil had been over-rough. To strip a friar of his cassock and flog him through the village with a cart-rope was too

loud a 'No' to a demand for dues. It was the curse of a peasant that he had no discretion in his zeal. Well, both these were past praying for, and as for the first, English Hugh would wipe out the shame from the name of Beaufoy, and with a bloody cloth. That once done, he might have the boy home again, and thus fling 'God's justice' back into the teeth of Monseigneur. A pest on him and his taunts!

Night had fallen, and Beaufoy, having long supped, was back again in the dim Justice-room. More than any spot in the great house of his ancestors, this gaunt and gloomy room had a fascination for him; for more than any spot it was the place where the men of his line had played their many parts.

A lamp stood on the oak table, another was fixed in a sconce by the open door, and as the flames flickered in the many currents, the gloomy recesses and remote corners were alive with the legends of his race. Hitherto he had taken a stern pride in these grim tales of blood and violence, but to-night he was in a new mood, and the sound of hoarse voices without, blending with the ring of iron on the pavement, was a relief. English Hugh was back from his mission.

'Well,' he cried, leaning forward as the man-

at-arms appeared in the doorway and halted under the sconce, 'is it done?'

'It is done, Seigneur, and well done.'

'And the rogue, their leader?'

For answer Hugh tapped the broad leathern pouch that hung at his side.

'So, it is well? To thy tale, then, man, and be brief.'

'First, Seigneur, the losses. We rode out a score and come home eighteen.'

'These are a man's chances, and we all set our lives on the cost,' answered Beaufoy.

'Who have paid forfeit?'

'Roger Marne, Seigneur, and Jean le Gaucher.'

'Good men both. God rest them! Well?'

'Next, the gains. Charnex has its beasts back, and, by St. George! I never had glummer thanks. When I bid the women-folk sleep in peace, for their dead were avenged, they scowled and turned away into the dark. I'll be sworn some wept, and one said——'

'What matters, man, what churls say? Their wits are still numb; go on with thy tale.'

'We took them unawares, Seigneur, and seeing they were but reivers, I thought it no shame to hold our vantage of surprise. So at

the first rush a half went down ; but him who I have here, or at least his token '—and again Hugh tapped his pouch—'he was a true son of a wolf, and fought—Saints, how he fought ! More than one of us carries his sign-manual, and it was he who put Roger on his back ; but the numbers did it, Seigneur, and we made an end of him at last. Two we hung, but the other eight had no breath left to choke. Then we rode back.'

'Then the chief rascal was no coward ?'

'No coward, and a fine swordsman, Seigneur. I would we had a dozen like him at Beaufoy.'

'Ha ! Beaufoy is well enough. Show me the carrion.'

Fumbling in his pouch, Hugh drew out the dismal fragment of humanity, and held it dangling in the light of the lamp as a man might hold some bird of a rare plumage. It had been severed two inches above the wrist ; its palm was sinewy and well formed, the fingers long and slender.

A faint gleam of yellow light caught the Count's eye as Hugh turned the hand this way and that.

'A ring !' he cried, laughing. 'So the rogue was by way of being a gentleman.'

'Faith, yes, Seigneur !' and Hugh's laugh

was louder than his master's; 'a ring, no less, crested and mottoed. The words are Greek to me, who am no scholar, but the crest is two daggers crossed.'

'What!' and Beaufoy's voice slew the laughter in the other's mouth, so hoarse and loud was the cry. 'The ring, man! Quick! The ring! God's life, fellow, quick, I say!'

As he spoke Beaufoy stumbled to his feet, flinging the lamp crashing on the floor in his haste.

'Let it be, fool! The ring!'

For an instant he held it up so that the light from the sconce by the door fell full upon it, showing the motto of the Sieurs of his house—

Tenez Bonnefoy Beaufoy.

Clasping the hand to his breast with his left arm, he turned upon the Englishman.

'Go, man, in God's name, lest I hang thee!'

And the last Hugh saw of the Seigneur was a figure bowed upon its knees at the darkened table, with its forehead resting on the token of Beaufoy's justice.

HIGH AND LOW JUSTICE

MEASURE eighteen miles as the road zigzags to the south-east, making from end to end fourteen miles of a crow-flight ; then bend to the right for half as far again, following the banks of the river, which there runs with but little curve ; turn once more to the right nineteen miles by the outskirts of the forest, then run a line north-east, roughly parallel with the river-bank, until you touch the starting-point, and you will enclose the domain over which Seigneur René François le Vaillant de Beaufoy, commonly called François de Beaufoy, claimed and exercised the rights of life and death, high justice and low justice ; he himself being pleader, judge, and jury, and against whose decisions there was no right of appeal.

Not Charles on his throne was more supreme than the Seigneur de Beaufoy within these bounds. Nay, the Seigneur's supremacy, if the more limited in extent, was the more absolute

in prompt assertion, and therefore the more revered, since the vengeance of the lesser lord struck quicker and sharper than the more tardy justice of the King.

Linked with this absolutism was a personal independence unknown at Court, and burdened only with the necessary alert watchfulness inseparable from the presence of such neighbours as those surrounding the Château Beaufoy. If the King in Paris was at odds in his day, now with Emperor, now with the Pope, so, to draw the parallel closer, was the Seigneur de Beaufoy in frequent handigrips, not alone with his fellow-lords, but also with the free-lances and organized bands of robbers which preyed upon the rich and harried the poor with all the indiscriminate impartiality of opportunity.

Then, as now, the axiom that power has its obligations as well as its privileges was true in practice; and so upon the Seigneur de Beaufoy there devolved the duty of enforcing protection within the two hundred and fifty or so square miles of his Suzerainty.

Probably it was for the rough-and-ready enforcement of this law and order that Louis le Jeune had first conferred on the founder of the line of Beaufoy his judicial rights, but, as is usually the case, the inch lengthened to an ell,

and the power was stretched to cover (for purposes far other than protection) all who crossed or dwelt within the limits of his lands, provided they could be profitably and safely struck.

To do the reigning Seigneur justice, the duty of safeguarding the peace of those who dwelt within his borders was not only recognised, but regularly performed. Woe to the free-lance who harried De Beaufoy's preserves! The Seigneur had a strong arm and a long reach, and the poorest serf of all who called him lord knew that, let his complaint be but well founded, no distance was too far for the sword-point of the Seigneur to strike the wrong-doer. Woe to the brigand who, trusting to the secret strengths of the forest belting the river-edge, sought to devour the weak of the Seigneur's flock! No depth of the boscage could hold him long hidden, and not once nor twice, but many a time, the strange fruit left dangling from an oak limb had proclaimed the triumph of summary justice and the enforcement of a righteous vengeance.

All such marauders might dwell upon his borders and welcome. Needs must that rogues dwell somewhere, and in certain cases their aid was welcome, but their harrying must be the harrying of the stranger, or, at worst, the noble

lords the Seigneur's good neighbours. Even then a judicious care was necessary, since to fall foul of an ally were almost as dangerous as to touch the Suzerainty itself ; but, to do him justice again, François de Beaufoy was not so much a man of peace as to be greatly beholden to the goodwill of his peers.

Defence, attack, and reprisals require force of arms, and so, in common with every feudal castle of the time, Château Beaufoy bristled with archers and spearmen, and was as jealously sentinelled as any frontier fort holding guard on the turbulent outskirts of a kingdom.

For defence' sake the Castle was perched on the crest of a hill which sloped away from it in all directions, thus dominating the approaches for three full bow-shots ; while, as for strength, he who beat down the outer rampart, or wrenched the iron gateway from its massive grooves, would still have turned back in despair from the solid resistance of the mighty walls of the Castle itself.

Upon the slopes of the hill, but sufficiently far apart to afford no protection to an enemy, were dotted oaks and chestnuts, their number growing with the distance, one solitary specimen being alone permitted within the circuit of the outer walls.

This was a decayed and blasted oak of immemorial age, whose once magnificent spread of luxuriant boughs had dwindled to two naked and lifeless limbs rising from a shell of hollowed trunk. Many and black and bloody enough were the legends twined about those ancient limbs, and when the chronicler sets them out in order, the history of the maimed oak will be found to antedate by many generations the Suzerainty of the line of Beaufoy.

Where the shadow of the leafage had of old time fallen when the sun was at noon, the windows of the Seigneur's Justice-hall looked out: a stern and gloomy room, as befitted the times and the grim secrets of the four walls.

On the stone settle in that corner where the sun never struck, Dame Margaret, of four generations back, was strangled for reasons best known to her lord and herself. If scandal had a tongue, it never wagged it, since the Beaufoy of the day was a stern man and a powerful. That brown stain on the door-post, five feet and more from the floor, and a deeper tint than the age of the oak, had its own tale to tell, for a threatened division of the Suzerainty ended there—ended suddenly, as is clear from the broad bruise in the wood where the battle-axe glanced from Henri de Beaufoy's

crushed headpiece. Lift the flag with the iron ring set under the level of its surface—lift it and look down. It will take your eyes three minutes to turn the blackness gray enough to give imagination shape; and when it does you will let slip the ring and look no more. A gloomy room, this Justice-hall of the Seigneurs, and full of men's wrath and passions.

A proud man was François de Beaufoy as he paced the hall that June day, his light sword making shrill music on the flags as he walked—proud of the many generations of his race; proud of the broad acres of his Suzerainty, held unshorn through all the chances and changes of those dangerous years; proud of the two young sturdy scions of his line, who, with those yet to come, would link on the glories of his house to as many generations in the future as there had been in the past; proud of the fulness of the life and strength pulsing in his veins and filling his brain with schemes and strokes of policy which were to broaden out his power; and, for the moment, proudest of all of the tale his man-at-arms was so full of the telling—a tale common enough, of evil wrought against some of the defenceless of his villeins, but none so common in those days in the swift and hearty vengeance which had followed.

‘Montbriou burned! The audacious hounds, to strike their game so near the Castle! Burned, sacked, and seven of my poor peasants slain! Would to the saints I had caught the rogues at the harrying: they would have roasted properly by the fires of Montbriou, and on their own swords for spits. Tell me of it again, Marmontel; I caught your story but carelessly at he first.’

Marmontel, Jackal to the Wolf, Squire to the Knight, Man-at-Arms to the Captain, soldier of fortune and faithful rogue, shifted his head-piece from his right arm to his left for greater freedom of gesture, and, nothing loth to tell a good tale to his own credit the second time, began:

‘By St. Anne, Seigneur, but it was rare work, that first brush with the rascals. The grass was none too soft, and because we were riding hotly they heard the hammer——’

François de Beaufoy paused in his walk.

‘See thou, Marmontel, a tale well told begins at the beginning, and not three parts to the end, where thine own glory cometh in. Go back on the slot, man, and begin afresh.

‘A shrewd stroke is more to my mind, Seigneur, than a long tale, but it runs something after this fashion:

‘ Half a score of us were coming at a walk round by the wooded spur above Montbriou, just where the knot of oaks shuts out the village from the bridle-path, with, it may be, a mile or more of wood and pasture between. Riding at ease, we were with never a thought but of jest or gossip, when Hugues, who, since that dagger-stroke down by Rochelle hath reason to keep his eyes afield, reined back his beast two paces on my left and pointed where, across the top of the oaks, a cloud lifted betwixt us and the river in the distance.

‘ It needed no man who had seen a sacked town to say “ Smoke ! ” So we wheeled to the left and went down the slope at a gallop. It was Montbriou ablaze, Seigneur, or, at least, a-smoulder, for the roofs were in and the flames out as we swept round by the oaks.

‘ Five minutes, and we were there ; five more, and we were off to the west as fast as horseflesh could travel, and every man of us with the fires of Montbriou biting at his heart for the sake of the seven left dead in their doorways. How many there were ahead ’twas hard to say. Some cried one thing and some another, and at every cry the numbers jumped up by the half-score. What would you have, Seigneur ? The poor souls were but peasants, and dis-

traught at that, by reason of their loss and the suddenness of the blow.

‘Sifting the tale out as we rode along, we judged there might be a score or more to face. It was at that that one of us half drew his rein, and said the odds were heavy against men and beasts sore pressed with hard riding, and that——’

‘Ha!’ broke in the Sieur, dashing his hand against the table by which he stood, ‘so there was a coward amongst you—a poltroon who weighed a nick in a whole skin against the honour of Beaufoy. By all the saints——’

‘Hard words strike heavier than hard blows, Seigneur. At the worst, he only half drew his rein, and at the best German Hans did his work like a man. May God deal by his soul more gently than he himself dealt by his own body when the brunt came. He’s dead, and Heaven rest him! As for the honour of Beaufoy, time enough to cry out when the shadow touches it.

‘Thence on we galloped the harder, and inside of forty minutes saw the rogues just getting to horse again in a broad glade with thin shelter at our side and a deep thicket beyond. But that they were encumbered with the cattle and the spoils of Montbriou, we had

never come within arm's-length of them; and now that they heard the hammer of our hoofs on the short turf, they showed no manner of willingness to throw aside their gains.

‘Ah, Seigneur!’—and Marmontel stopped to wet his lips, grown dry in the eagerness of his tale—‘ah, Seigneur! but for these seven stretched dead at Montbriou, it had been worth the cost of the burning and harrying to have the dash and fury of that first brush. Ten to twenty are none too many and none too few. You can see your men, every one, and there is nought to confuse. In through the trees we swept, the loose timber splitting us up so that none in the glade beyond might know how exactly we would break upon them. Into the shadow, between the stems like ghosts, and out into the sunlight and upon them with a roar in our throats that might have stirred the seven of Montbriou. Sharp work and short, Seigneur, with scant time to give an eye as to who struck this stroke and who that—scant time, in truth, for anything but the man in front, and the next who might come after him as he went down. Ten minutes, perhaps, all told, but it was the living of a lifetime. By St. Anne! but Beaufoy has no need to blush for its men. How many broke into cover behind I know not; not many

I trow, and few unhurt, but I can take an oath to seventeen who go northward no more. And we? Oh, ay; there's no omelet without the breaking of eggs. German Hans has a hole in his throat, over-big to hold in his soul; Hugues, Bassomme, and Grossetête are in no better case. The Spaniard—his name was ever too much for my tongue—and Marcel are good for naught but Father Clement's prayers, and I doubt not he has smoothed their journey ere this. It will be a long one, and over by night-fall, if I know aught of sword-thrusts.

‘That makes six, Seigneur; the other four have more need of the leech than the Church; and I, to my shame, am the only sound man out of nigh three dozen, all told.’

François de Beaufoy drew a long breath as the tale ended.

‘I would give five years of my life for those ten minutes, Marmontel, and I would lay a wager, my friend, that your sword is not as scatheless as your body. No need for shame at a skin held sound by a quick eye, good steel, and a better address.’

For answer Marmontel drew out his sword, broken in two within ten inches of the hilt.

‘It went at the third man, Seigneur, and him I finished with my poniard. As for five years,

hold what you've got, say I. Hans and the rest, I doubt not, would have made the same barter three hours ago.'

'Tut, man!' answered De Beaufoy, 'what wouldst thou have? They did their duty, and died in the doing of it. Let us do ours in our day, and pay the same cost an need be. Let's look at that hilt of thine. Come now, Marmontel, what boon for this day's work? It was a man's blow that notched that gap; had it caught thee unawares, it had shorn thee to the breast-bone. What boon for upholding the honour of Beaufoy? Nay, never stammer like that, man, and see that thou rankest not my honour too low.'

Marmontel laid down his headpiece on the oaken table, and, leaning both hands on the edge, bent forward.

'A word's a word, Seigneur; and—and it there's aught that's due me, though I did no more than the rest, why—why——'

'Why,' broke in De Beaufoy — 'why — why, dost thou want my little Renée to wife, and she three come the last day of next month?'

'Nay, my lord; but there's a wench in it for all that, and if the Seigneur will but shut his eyes and ears, the debt's paid.'

‘A wench—thou?’ cried De Beaufoy. ‘What gnat in the brain is this?’

‘Nay, no gnat, but a wench, though one may buzz as fast as the other,’ answered Marmontel sourly, since forty takes ill the bantering which but flatters twenty, ‘and a word passed is still a word, e’en though it be not for gold crowns.’

‘Ay; is the bolt so near the heart as that? Well, I have done with jesting; word or no word, I’ll have no harrying of the lambs of my flock—no, not even for thee. For how, tell me, is law to be upheld if I wink at evil to a maid to please your whim?’

‘Now, by St. Anne,’ answered the other, ‘who spoke of evil? Would I sully the blood of my heart, Seigneur? Why, I would not so much as seek to look the wench in the face but by grace of Father Clement.’

De Beaufoy stamped his foot.

‘Then, take her, man—take her. What’s the pother?’

‘Why,’ said Marmontel shamefacedly, ‘no pother, but a matter of taste, and that she will have none of me.’

‘Oh, ho! Sits the bird on that tree? Why, what a dust about nothing! Whose wench is she? And, my word for it, but I’ll see to the rest.’

Marmontel shook his head.

‘Nay, had that been all it had been soon settled, but Gustave Breigne will have two words to say to the bargain.’

‘Ha! Breigne, Breigne—who?—ay, I have him now. Where got such a lout a wench to lime a man like thee? But that’s by the way, since the liming of a man comes not by logic. See you, man, I owe this fellow a grudge, and to pay you a debt and strike him with the same stroke is shrewd policy. You mean well by the wench? Ay, then bid Father Clement bide within this afternoon; he will have work enough on hand with those seven of Montbriou and our own six. I doubt not the grip that holds Hugues in keeping will not slacken over-easily. To get thirteen of Beaufoy out of purgatory is no light travail. Take six stout fellows, and you and I and they will ride a-wooing presently, and, my word for it, Marmontel, Father Clement will have an unwonted labour ere nightfall.’

Four leagues to the west of Château Beaufoy the forest grows thick enough to harbour every wild beast in the circuit of life from man to wolf. None but a woodman, bred to the fullest in forest lore, could safely penetrate its recesses, so vast was its extent and so perplexing its deadly similarity mile by mile.

Such a woodman was Gustave Breigne, the charcoal-burner, whose one-roomed, turf-roofed hut lay a furlong deep in the forest. More than twenty years before he had come from none knew where, and had lived alone a sullen, solitary life. Then came a three months' interval, during which there drifted no white smoke from his furnace-pits, and when at last the fires were once more alight, Gustave Breigne was no longer alone, but had to wife a dark-faced woman from the South. Of her no man knew aught more than of him, and no man sought to know, for Gustave Breigne had earned for himself an evil reputation, over which his neighbours, remote enough in such a country, muttered and looked askance.

It was not so much because of the Seigneur's deer, slaughtered on a moonlight night, nor for the whisper of trafficking with the bandits who held the forest as a lurking-place, nor even for the winter night's gossip of belated travellers who never saw the morning sun, but of whom Gustave Breigne knew more than he said : stories enough, and lies for the most part. But there were those who told strange tales of shadows seen at night in the shifting light of the furnace-mouth when the smoke was thin and blue and smelt of evil—shadows that

shivered and danced, wavering in shape from man to beast and beast to devil, with Gustave Breigne himself moving among them larger than human. The deer, they were well enough ; the bandits might be friends at a pinch, and to keep on their smooth side was wise ; and as for the hints of murder, why, Beaufoy himself had a name that some might cavil at, and there were times with every honest man when it was his life or another's ; but witches and devils, hell's familiars and the like, that touched a man's soul ; and so, for the sake of the grossest lie of them all, the Breignes were cut apart.

For three years there came to their cabin but two changes—the common alternations of life and death ; a girl child was born to them, then, two years later, the household of three became two once more. The mother died. Had he so willed it, Gustave might at that time have entered into closer relationship with those about him, since death and sorrow break down more barriers than life and gladness. But it was now his turn to repel advances, and he would none of their kindliness. Thenceforward he and the little Marthe were outcasts.

That had been fifteen years before, and for those fifteen years, while each went a separate

way, each had been all in all the one to the other. Untaught, unguided, Marthe had grown up in the woods with as free a life as any dryad of olden times. Fearless and untiring, she left nothing unexplored in her world of thickets, and it was while on one of her solitary excursions by the outskirts of the forest that she had been first seen by Marmontel.

What set the war-hardened veteran ablaze was a mystery to himself, since, beyond her supple strength of limb and that grace of carriage which was the gift of the life she led, there was but little to attract one so seasoned by experience. But ablaze he was from the first hour he saw her watching him through the trailing boughs of a broken oak. Many a time thereafter he had business that way, cursing himself in his heart for a fool the while. Thrice he spoke to her, and once he sought to touch her. Each time she had answered him courteously enough, but with short replies. The further advance had less success, for, as he leant from his saddle, her suspicions were on the moment alert, and she fled zigzag to the trees more swiftly than, in such a place, his horse could follow. Then—and his ears ever after tingled when he thought of it—when at a safe distance, she turned, and with clear voice

and clearer language, cursed him roundly for a foul beast.

That had been three days before, and Marmontel, while his ears burned, loved her none the less for the outburst, but rather more.

As the fifteen years passed, Gustave had gloomed and soured, but, until a certain thing happened, his moroseness was catholic and of equal application ; thereafter, while losing none of its catholicity, it had special bitterness against the Château Beaufoy and all therein.

That which put edge upon his hate was nothing uncommon in those days, and inside of three months was forgotten by all save father and daughter, until at last the sight of Marthe in the woods brought back the three-years-old tale to Marmontel, who cursed his ill-luck that in this case of all others the Seigneur should have seen fit to take such a vengeance.

Gustave Breigne had killed one too many of the Beaufoy deer ; had been caught in the very act of driving home the knife in the *coup de grâce*, and six hours later had had his left hand hacked off at the wrist with his own blade and the severed limb nailed upon his own lintel. The trial is a short one where all is accusation and nothing defence, and François de Beaufoy

had taken credit for his mercy in not lopping the right hand rather than the left.

If at the time Gustave Breigne said but little, it was because he knew that a silent tongue keeps a sound head, but he hated Château Beaufoy and all within it none the less bitterly for his silence. In the three years all this had been forgotten until Marmontel named the woodman to the Seigneur, then, as is the fashion of human nature when the suffering is another's, the crime came back as clear as noon, while the expiation was lost out of sight.

Down the hill from the turret-gate of the Castle the woovers rode at leisure, the Seigneur first, Marmontel half a length behind to the left, and the six stout men-at-arms in double file ten paces in the rear. Clear of the courtyard, François de Beaufoy halted on the broad belt of turf which swept in a circle round the Château and threw his hand up into the air.

‘By all the saints, Marmontel, but what a world of good there is in life ! I vow I would not change Beaufoy for the Empire itself !’

‘Ay,’ the other answered bluntly, for his mind was full of a difficulty to come, ‘to the Suzerain it’s well enough, but for the maimed man yonder——’

Then he stopped, and nodded westward.

‘The hawk to his nest, and such dogs to their cover,’ said De Beaufoy sternly; ‘wouldst have me darken my sunshine for a rogue’s self-cast shadows, that you link me with that thief? A man who is a fool at two-score is the worst fool on God’s earth, since he has lived long enough to be wise, and not so long as to be dotard. Has the girl bewitched thee that thou talkest in such a fashion? Nay, man, look and judge it for itself. See the slope, and the rise, and the slope beyond, with the blue where the forest is hidden. See the sunshine and the shadow and the chase of cloud, and there, on that side, the glint of the river. See the dapple of the trees in the wind, hear the lowing of the cattle, the murmur of life from beyond yonder hill-shoulder.’

‘Ay,’ broke in Marmontel grimly; ‘it’s the women wailing their dead at Montbriou. Well enough for the Seigneur, I say again, but what of the mishandled peasants down the way?’

De Beaufoy beat his clenched fist against his thigh.

‘Plague take your croaking! You poison the heart of June. Life or death is the chance of us all.’

‘Nay,’ persisted the other, ‘I but said that

it was better for the Seigneur than for the villein.'

De Beaufoy gathered up his reins and rode on.

'Have done, I say; had I not passed my word to thee, thou mightest go hang for the wench.'

Ten minutes later he halted. Across the shoulder of the hill there came from the left, sharper and clearer, the outcry of lamentation. Before, and with a trend to the right, dwelt Gustave Breigne.

'To Montbriou first,' he said, and, with a jerk of the bridle, turned across the hill.

The village, a handful of huts drawn closely together, but without any system of arrangement, lay on the southern slope of the hill, set in small breadths of half-grown wheat. From the wreck of some of the collapsed houses a sluggish smoke still rose, whilst others, the least ruined, were already in process of restoration.

Busy as were the workers, it was not on them that the interest centred as the troop rode slowly down the slope, but rather on a group clustered together at the upper end of the village, a group of the women and the children girdled round the seven who that day had died for the homes of Montbriou.

They lay, not as they had fallen, but stretched out in rigid lines of death, shoulder to shoulder and hand to hand, and at the head knelt Father Clement, the one silent mourner of all the living.

As the Seigneur drew near, the insistent lamentation died into sobs, and the circle of the women parted so that he rode onward, up to the very feet of the dead, and there drew rein.

While he paused, looking silently down on the face of death, a woman, gaunt with labour and age, thrust her way to his stirrup-iron, and brushing aside traditional terror and respect in the despair of loss, seized his rein.

‘Husband and son in the one hour, Seigneur—husband and son! Hush your whimpering there, that the Seigneur may hear my men crying out for vengeance. It’s an ill day when the dead cry and none heed. Ha! do you hear? Sorrow for sorrow! Life for life! Blood for blood!’ and the other hand was reached out and shook De Beaufoy by the arm.

Except in his passions, or when his pride was touched, De Beaufoy was ever a kindly man, else not even the dead had been her surety for such boldness. As it was :

‘Ay, mother,’ he said, ‘vengeance enough and sorrow enough, but not by me. Ask Marmontel there.’

‘Her arm dropped, and she shifted her gaze to the man-at-arms. Marmontel answered her look grimly enough.

‘Blow for blow,’ he said, ‘and blood for blood, though it cost six more in the avenging.’

The woman drew in her breath with a shrill scream, and leaving the Seigneur, she turned to Marmontel, stroking and fawning upon him with her hands.

‘Tell me,’ she said in a hoarse whisper, as if her voice had sunk deep down in her throat—‘all? Are all dead?’

‘Sixteen for seven is good count,’ answered Marmontel; ‘and if six I wot of could speak, they would say the score was more than even.’

‘Sixteen, sixteen!’ and she broke into a halting laugh, only to check herself suddenly. ‘Only sixteen! Then what of the other five? Had no man of ye all a thrust for them?’ Then again her mood changed. ‘Pray God ye slew them who laid these two there. Blood for blood! Life for life!’ and her voice ran into a scream. ‘The blessing of the weak, who cannot strike for themselves, be upon thee. The saints give thee thy heart’s desire.’

De Beaufoy laughed. Dead peasants were over-common for a waste either of time or of sensitive tenderness.

‘Right, mother,’ he said. ‘Thy shaft goes home. See him redden under the bronze. Marmontel is out a-wooing to-day, and, on the faith of a De Beaufoy, his heart’s desire is his. Hark you, Father Clement. In the midst of death we are in life, and the Church will be sorely needed ere sundown. See that you fail not at the Castle. For these—God rest them, and send us all as good an ending ; De Beaufoy asks no better. As for thee, mother, Beaufoy forgets not Montbriou. My dame will see to that. The day wears : spurs, my men, and sharply !’

Thenceforward it was brisker work, and in spite of Marmontel’s gloom and the shadow of death from the stricken village, their spirits rose with the heat of the gallop and the whistle of the wind in their ears.

Gustave Breigne’s charcoal-pits were in full blast that day, rolling out their dense smoke in huge clouds ; and Gustave Breigne himself, having dined, was at rest by the door of his hut.

For all that his shoulders were bowed by labour, the man’s life was as vigorous within him as when, that score of years before, he had

brought Marthe's mother home to the shadows of Beaufoy woods.

Since the day death had also come beneath the shadows Gustave Breigne had had but two passions—Marthe and his toil. These, until of late, had filled his existence ; but now there was added a third, no less absorbing—his hatred of Château Beaufoy.

The disability of his maiming had been overcome in a rough fashion by the strapping on to the stump of the forearm a two-pronged V-shaped iron, one of the prongs being bent into a hook. With this he steadied the handle of his axe, and, by help of a ring fixed near the end of the haft, he even came in time to assist the strength of his right arm. The unbent prong served the purpose of a rude fork.

With such a reminder ever before his eyes Gustave Breigne was not likely easily to forgive. Marmontel, then, was amply justified in his belief that the charcoal-burner would have no dealings with Château Beaufoy, and as the man-at-arms rode through the thickening glades on the outskirts of the forest his own forebodings pressed in upon him heavier than ever.

At length out of the very bitterness of his heart he plucked up courage and spoke :

‘Tis a fool's errand, Seigneur, and I the fool

to hunt a slip of a girl, and of such a bitter stock. Evil will come of it, and no wench in all Angoulême, nay, in broad France itself, is worth an honest man's blood. I was hot enough this morning and prinked up with pride when I craved the boon. Now I am chill, and the boon is none so great.'

But the sight of the white smoke drifting through the tree-stems had, in some unreasoning fashion, stirred the Seigneur's gall.

'Whose blood? Thine or Gustave Breigne's? A pretty talk of honest men, be it one or the other. Is your Seigneur a fool-puppet to ride on a barren errand? By the faith of Beaufoy, you wed the maid this night, will she, nill she, or you hang on the Castle oak. Am I to be flouted by your tremors at a maimed man? Or is it the flutter of a homespun petticoat that makes you quake? I tell you, not all the devils that ever danced at Gustave Breigne's fires shall stay my will. Ah, the thing falls out as it should, for all thy croaking! See!'

They were now hard upon Breigne's hut; the glade, cleared by his woodcraft, alone lying between, and midway across the open space was Marthe, seated upon the grass in the sunshine.

'You six round between the wench and the

hut : a scared doe ever runs to cover. Now, Marmontel, do thy devoirs, and if the girl cry out, why, thou hast stopped a woman's mouth ere this, and knowest the trick of it, I'll wager.'

At the noise of the trampling Gustave Breigne had risen, and as the horsemen broke cover he stood by the door of the hut with his hand to his brow looking out across the glade.

Thenceforward what passed passed in a flash. There was the dash of the men-at-arms, three on this side, three on that, and meeting beyond the girl. Marmontel's rush to the centre of the glade, an easy fling from the saddle, a none so easy clamber back with Marthe fighting in his grasp like a wolf-cub, and François de Beaufoy advancing slowly into the open.

With a cry that rang across the glade and a broad furlong beyond, Gustave Breigne, as he guessed their purpose, had leaped towards his daughter, only to meet the six horsemen face to face and stagger back. The line of naked steel was beyond attack. An instant he stood glaring at them, his one hand outstretched and gripping at the air, then :

' Hell's devils burn Beaufoy ! ' he howled, and turning, fled back to the hut.

As he turned the Seigneur, twenty yards out in the sunshine, broke into a laugh.



"Gustave Breigne had notched his third shaft."

‘Eh! Gustave Breigne,’ he said, ‘’tis easier to kill a deer than save a doe.’

With the laugh stinging him like a whipstroke, Gustave Breigne darted through the door of his hut, and from within came the rattle and crash as of light dry rods flung this way and that in the hot search of passionate haste. When he reappeared, it was with a stout bow and three arrows in his grip.

Short as had been his disappearance, it had been long enough to change the setting of the scene in the clearing. The eight horsemen had drawn together at the farther side, and in the midst was Marmontel with Marthe, still fighting desperately, held fast in his arms.

Gustave Breigne seized the arrows in his teeth, and, straining the bow with knee and hook, strung it. Three seconds notched an arrow in the string, two more braced the bow against the iron fork, and a shaft sang across the glade—harmless. A second followed, and as it splintered on Marmontel’s headpiece, François de Beaufoy reined in his horse with an angry jerk, and turned, leaning back in his saddle.

‘This hound is overbold,’ he cried, ‘and needs a lesson. Back there, four of you, and——’

While he spoke Gustave Breigne had notched

his third shaft, and full in the midst of the command the arrow, drawn to the head, was loosed. With a gasp the Seigneur flung his hands into the air, and tumbling over his horse's flank, fell in a heap on the grass. The arrow had struck him full in the breast, and the fall snapped it across three inches from the ribs.

An instant's silence followed, then Marmontel, with that instinct which makes an enemy the first thought of the soldier, cried :

‘Seize yonder fellow ! Your lives for his ; he has stricken the Seigneur !’ and flinging Marthe from him as a thing no longer of account, he leaped to the ground.

Small thought had Gustave Breigne of escape. As he stood when the arrow left the bow, so he stood, dumb and staring, when ten seconds later the troopers swooped upon him.

As Marmontel lifted the fallen man, François de Beaufoy opened his eyes.

‘Take me home,’ he said under his breath—
‘home, and quickly, for this is death.’

‘A hard hit, truly, Seigneur, for all there is so little blood. God curse the hand——’

‘Ha !’ said De Beaufoy louder and hoarser,
‘Gustave Breigne ?’

Marmontel looked across the glade, answering the thought rather than the words.

‘Shall we hang the dog to his lintel? Ay, and the wench by him?’

But the Seigneur shook his head.

‘That can wait,’ he said. ‘Home first, for I am on fire here,’ and he touched his breast.

It was but a slow procession that three hours later climbed the hill to the Castle gate, and François de Beaufoy was more corpse than living man when at last they laid him down in that broad hall shadowed by the blasted oak. Against the north wall of the hall, midway between the door and the farther end, was a stout settle, and there they stretched the man who that morning had trod the flags with so proud a step.

Cutting loose the brodered doublet and jerkin, the leech had need of but scant skill in wounds to know that the Seigneur of Beaufoy held a weak grip on his Suzerainty. The splintered shaft still remained where it had struck, and none dared touch it, since its plucking out meant the leaping after of François de Beaufoy’s life.

The wounded man, looking up from his stone settle, read in the bent face the truth he had himself foretold; and knowing the value of the

grains of time still remaining, frittered away no strength with useless questions or many words.

‘Catherine?’

‘My lady is with the dead at Montbriou. She has been sent for in all haste.’

‘Good! The dead here will have a claim too. Gustave Breigne?’

‘Under close guard in the watch-tower.’

‘Your lives for his!’ and a light blazed up in the eyes an instant, then died out, and the lids closed over.

Noiselessly Father Clement stole in from the outer hall, and monk and leech stood by the dying man side by side, watching silently.

Suddenly, as by an effort of will, the eyes opened, but the brows were drawn down, and the face set and stern, for all its ghastly pallor.

‘How long?’

Beyond the passing of a wet cloth softly across the forehead and lips, the leech made no answer.

‘How long?’ said the hoarse voice again, hoarser and more insistent. ‘One hour or two? God’s curse, man, speak out! Have I leisure for such nice mummary of respect? One hour or two?’ The leech shook his head, but made no direct answer. ‘Not one hour? Then get

all men from me for one-fourth my lifetime, that I may think.'

The two drew back hesitatingly, then said Father Clement :

'Nay, Seigneur, surely there is much to be done, and the time is short.'

'Ay,' answered De Beaufoy, 'surely there is much to be done, and the time is short. The more reason for few words and a quick obedience. Confession presently, Father; there is something, as I think, which must come first.'

Then he closed his eyes, and at an imperative motion of his hand the two withdrew, the priest whispering as he went :

'Tis some need of reparation that lies heavy on his soul ; some repentance that is a work as well as a sorrow. Pray God he make haste, for the end is not far off.'

'If he but cry out,' answered the other, 'he is dead.'

As the sound of the shuffling feet died away, De Beaufoy looked out once more on his hall of justice, and a great bitterness grew in his heart. There was the sunshine slanting in through the narrow windows ; there beyond, the beauty of the sky cut by the gray line of the outer wall, the bustle, the stir, the expansion of life were

all at work, even as when he was in his strength ; and now the mill of life still ground on, though he lay with death gripping at his heart. His glory of power was cankered, his greatness but a crushed potsherd ; and at the thought of the contrast between the then and the now he ground his teeth and groaned a curse under his breath.

Slowly his eyes passed round the hall, noting its massive strength. Ay, that was built to last, while he had but an hour betwixt him and clay, and after him came Raoul. At the thought of the children his face softened, and, as if the thought had called them, there came on the instant the pattering of their feet on the flags.

Solemn-eyed and dimly conscious of misfortune, the two, Raoul and Renée, stood a moment hand in hand by the doorway ; then walked slowly up the hall, slowly, slowly, staring with uncomprehending curiosity at this father of theirs in his new mood of unwonted stillness. The very silence made them afraid, and they paused, shrinking back, their hands clasping one another the tighter.

Suddenly Raoul shook himself clear.

‘ See, Renée,’ he cried, ‘ father’s got something.’ And running forward, he put out his hand to grip the broken arrow in François de

Beaufoy's naked breast. Left alone with her fears, Renée broke into a dolorous wail, and at the cry Raoul turned back. 'Come, Renée,' he said, 'father's sleepy,' and, again hand in hand, they stole away, and De Beaufoy had seen the last of his race.

Once again the bitterness of death passed upon the stricken man. His day was done. What now would come to Beaufoy in those turbulent times, and the Seigneur a feeble child? Since the days of the Suzerainty men had led men. Strong hands had held what strong hands had handed down to them, and cool brains had plotted for its enlargement. What was that text Father Clement had preached from five Sundays past? 'Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child.' Beaufoy would be rent in pieces; robber hordes upon this side, free-lances upon that, and crafty, unscrupulous neighbours upon both this and that. The patient building up of generations stricken down by a bolt's blow! Ha! that he could at least avenge! And his eyes rolled round in their sockets seeking for the shadow of the maimed oak.

It was ominous of the end that Father Clement returned alone: the leech had no further part in the tragedy; but as the priest

stooped to kneel by the settle-head, François de Beaufoy stopped him with a gesture.

‘Time enough for that,’ he said. ‘Justice for life, the Church for death. Send me Marmontel; he and I have somewhat to do.’

Father Clement drew back.

‘Nay, Seigneur, Heaven’s mercy first, and then earth’s justice.’

‘Ay, that’s well enough; but maybe the justice will need the mercy, so this time let the first come second. Send me Marmontel.’

‘Seigneur, I pray you.’

Beaufoy half turned on the settle.

‘Priest, would you have me die unconfessed? Send me Marmontel.’

‘But——’

‘But no buts. Have I breath for wrangling? Send me Marmontel; when he and I and Gustave Breigne are done the one with the other, then—— In God’s name hasten, man, for the life runs low in me.’

Seeing that it was useless to urge him further, Father Clement went in haste in search of the man-at-arms, and speedily returned with him, and then took again his place by the settle.

Tough-fibred though he was, the blow which struck De Beaufoy had sorely wounded Marmontel. Death was common enough, and that

a man should die for his Seigneur was nothing out of the course of nature; but that the Seigneur should lie there stricken to the death in his quarrel, and for such a shred of value as a whimsy wench, hit Marmontel hard.

The ruddy bronze of his cheeks had faded into an ashy gray, and the nerve that had borne him unmoved over a dozen stricken fields had broken down, so that he shook and trembled and went cold like a girl at her first sight of blood.

Not even the chill creeping so relentlessly up from his feet nor the growing torment of fire in his breast, had brought home to De Beaufoy the nearness of the end as did the white face of Marmontel. How near and how terrible a thing this death must be, if it could thus shatter so hardened a nature! Back into his heart surged the bitterness of loss, and if Gustave Breigne's life had ever stood a chance of safety, Marmontel's white face killed that chance at once and for ever. Very feebly the Seigneur beckoned with outstretched fingers. The slightest gesture, no more, for with such a truth staring at him through Marmontel's eyes, it behoved him to conserve his strength.

'Nearer,' he whispered, 'nearer, nearer still. Thine ear to my mouth. This is betwixt us

twain, and is nought of the Church's—at least as yet. Hang me Gustave Breigne to Beaufoy's oak.' Then seeing, perhaps, a question in the other's face, he broke out: 'God's life, man, my word's my word, though it be but a whisper!'

Marmontel raised his head as if to speak, but the Seigneur stopped him.

'Hark you! If the leech be right, I have thirty minutes in which to hang Gustave Breigne and make my peace with God. So hasten thou.'

Without a word Marmontel got him out of the Justice-hall, and with the silence following the ring of his spurs on the flags Beaufoy twisted himself round, the better to see the outline of the oak against the clear olive of the failing twilight. His wolfish look stung the priest into fresh action. Leaving the settle-foot, he flung himself on his knees beside the dying man.

'Bethink you, Seigneur, at such a time as this, and God so near—ay, at the very threshold, or within the doors. Let mercy crown the end, mercy as you hope for mercy, Seigneur—Seigneur.'

Beaufoy put up one hand and grasped the splintered shaft to hold it firmly in its place,

and with the other he leaned heavily on the kneeling monk, raising himself that he might see the better.

‘Silence, priest!’ he said. ‘Thy time to speak cometh presently, for repentance is not far off.’

Beyond the narrow windows was the bustle of men passing and repassing in great haste.

‘Oh for another hour!’ groaned De Beaufoy, ‘one hour, one! Is the light growing dim that I cannot see? Surely that shadow was—— Ay, there goes the passing bell. Aid me, priest, nearer, nearer, that I may see.’

Higher, higher he lifted himself, and at the fifth stroke of the bell fell forward at the priest’s feet—dead.

A QUEEN'S FAVOUR

FOR all that the Château of Pau is the greatest in the kingdom of Navarre, it is not beloved by the people. Our King Henry tolerated its labyrinths of corridors and traditional stiffness of Court etiquette for the sake of what lay beyond the walls, since nowhere could he find more royal sport than in the woods which so thickly covered the hills a league south of the Gave, which, as the world knows, washes the hill-slope upon whose ridge stands the Château. A wandering bear from the higher spurs, boars in sufficiency, wolves beyond sufficiency, and the curse of our peasants, were the quarry beyond the walls; and there were not wanting those who hinted that the rambling corridors lent themselves to a pursuit less royal, though as much to the King's taste, when the rain, drifting in from the west, pent us indoors; but it is charity to suppose that these last spoke in malice rather than in good faith.

To us courtiers, bound by form and servants to ceremony, the cold shadows of Paris usages which haunted Pau were unutterably irksome. We sighed for the freedom of Orthez or Navarreux, where the King was plain Monsieur d'Albret and we his fellow gentlemen; and trebly irksome it was when—as at this time—the Queen was in Paris, and the Court bereft of half her ladies.

To one who did not know the crooked policies of the day, it would have seemed the very time to fling ceremony aside and bid the Court go play, but our shrewd King and we of his council knew better. Failing the policy of assassination, what was the prime aim of Henry of France? To set wife and husband at variance, and so give himself a brotherly right to put an armed hand on Navarre for the great comfort of his sister and the aggrandizement of his kingdom. To this end spies were as thick in Navarre as priests at a burial, and that the enemy might not have cause to blaspheme, we doubled punctilio until such time as the Queen's return restored us to gaiety. For all their whimsies and occasional cross-purposes, these two understood one another marvellously, and were agreed—as was wise—upon a large toleration. So long, therefore, as the same walls

held King and Queen, France could do little mischief. What I have now to tell of is of a mischief that failed, even in the Queen's absence, thanks to a watchfulness as far distant as Paris is from Pau.

For five-and-forty minutes of a council meeting we had played with admirable seriousness at doing nothing. For the moment there was no plot brewing, whether by intolerant Catholics or fanatical Huguenots. We were at peace with Spain on the south, and suspiciously friendly with France on the north. As to finances, we had no money, and therefore, with the lightheartedness of empty pockets, gave no thought to the spending of it! Still, we played the game of governing a kingdom with as solemn a carefulness as the Augurs of old invoked destiny, and with an equal faith in our own usefulness. There was, therefore, a general rousing into interest when the King, from his raised seat at the head of the table, demanded if the business of the council were concluded, and being told 'Ay' by the wondering secretary, went on, taking a paper from a leather pouch by his side :

'The thousand ways in which my good brothers of France have shown their love to me are known to you ; now, and not for the

first time, it is the turn of Madame, my mother. Remembering our loneliness, she sends my dear friend the Comte de Clazonay to cheer us. To-night the Count arrives—not, remember, gentlemen, as ambassador, but as friend and comrade. See to it that his welcome fits the occasion, and do you, Monsieur de Bernauld, remain at the breaking up of the council that I may instruct you as to his reception.'

Then he rose abruptly, as if to prevent inquiry, and in the bustle that followed, Rosny plucked me by the sleeve.

'What has come to him, with his rounded periods and dear comrades? There will be need for a second brain in this, so I will wait you in the hall below.'

That was Rosny all over. In his eyes no man had the wit of a frog save himself.

While the council-chamber emptied, Henry stood in an embrasure overlooking the Gave, his hands clenched behind his back, his beard sunk upon his breast, and his face wrinkled as was his habit when in deep thought. As the door closed he turned, all his suave smoothness gone, and in its place the hawk's look we came to know so well in those long days of struggle when the throne of France was the stake of the game.

‘All that,’ he said harshly, ‘was for La Vraillie’s itching ears. Let him earn his hire from Catherine with the telling of it. Read this, old friend, and tell me which has Clazonay come to strike—Navarre or only Henry?’

‘If he strikes the last, Sire—which God forbid he dreams of—he strikes the first,’ said I, taking the papers. ‘But this is from the Queen; perhaps you——’

‘Read, man, read,’ he broke in impatiently, and turned back again to the window. ‘’Tis as you say, from the Queen to the King; had it been from Margot to the Lord knows who, your nice caution had been more justified.’

Yet, considering many things which the King knew better than I, it was a warm letter enough, and ran something in this fashion :

‘MONSIEUR, AND MY VERY DEAR HUSBAND,

‘Though Navarre is so many leagues away, it is very near to me in my thoughts, and that I may be brought closer to thee, our good mother has lent me thy ancient and very true friend, Monsieur de Clazonay, to carry to thee news of how I fare. That, because of thy weighty affairs in Navarre, thou canst not be persuaded to visit Paris is to her a great grief,

and also to our brother Henry. I kiss thee on both cheeks.

‘Thy very faithful and very loving wife,
‘MARGUERITE.

‘Mindful of thy love for the chase, and that thou mayest the better keep us in memory, we beg thee to wear the gift whereof Monsieur de Clazonay is bearer.’

A very sweet and lover-like letter, but, as it seemed to me, somewhat unlike Madame Marguerite. The former thought I told the King; the latter, for the sake of peace, I kept to myself.

‘Ay,’ answered he, facing me, ‘and the bee with the honey-bag carries a sting in its tail. Look at the seal, De Bernauld, look at the seal.’

Turning the letter to the light, I found it sealed in two places, the first splash of red wax bearing the cipher ‘M. V.’; the second a serpent reared upon its coils, and with head poised ready to strike.

‘The doves of Venus are more to Margot’s liking,’ went on Henry, ‘and yon venomous thing is a fair warning. I were a greater fool than Madame the Queen-Mother has yet found me if I neglected it. Note the postscript, De Bernauld. There is much need of a gift,

is there not, to freshen my memory of Catherine de Medici? By the Lord who made me what I am, it is hard to bear with patience the witch's cajoleries! The voice is Margot's voice, but the hand is Catherine's, and the man she flatters had best walk circumspectly! Note, too, the messenger. I know this fellow De Clazonay of old. When Bearn wedded France and Coligny was in favour, he thought our star in the ascendant, and turned Huguenot, but the mild persuasions of Bartholomew were too many for him, and he recanted. Ay, I know what you would say, Monsieur de Bernauld, that I, too, have turned and recanted; but our cases are not equal. The liberties of a nation count for more than a place at Court. He is my very good friend, this De Clazonay, and for cause, since in the old days, and over that same recantation, I stood him in good stead. Guise was no more prone to mercy then than now, and but for poor Henry of Navarre, De Clazonay had been one of the forgotten thousands, recantation or no recantation. Now, like the cur he is, he comes to bite the hand that saved him.'

All this seemed to me an overlarge deduction from a splash of wax, but the King would hear of no reply.

‘I know the man,’ he said stubbornly, ‘and I know his mistress. The only point of doubt is whether he comes to foment a quarrel or——’ and he stopped short, tapping himself on the breast significantly. ‘For the one, see that no pretext be given him, and if he lies of the Queen with hints and smiles, turn a deaf ear and play the dullard. For the second, that is your affair, since a King of Navarre must hold himself a frank gentleman even to traitors. Meet him for me, De Bernauld, and feed him with his own honey. Speak of our anxious affection for our mother in Paris, our gratitude for her tender thought; thou knowest the trick of lies, for all that thou art a man of camps rather than courts.’ Here he linked his arm in mine and drew me towards the door, as was his habit when, having said his say, he desired to throttle all reply.

‘Speak of our love for the Queen, the austereness of our life, our unconsolated grief at her absence! What, man, thou hast my meaning? I myself will see to it that La Belle Fadette does not cross his path.’

Then, his eyes twinkling and with an upward twist of his moustache, he flung open the door and was gone, leaving me staring.

Truly here was a thorny burr to handle, and

one like to prick my fingers. If the King were right, a false move might give our greedy neighbour a pretext for armed intervention, and then farewell to Navarre's liberties. As I gnawed my beard I inwardly cursed my fortune that Henry had not rather given his confidences to the more supple-minded De Rosny, to whom diplomatic lies and crooked policies were but playthings.

Yet, for all that, I kept my counsel when De Rosny stopped me in the hall below, intent to pick my brains; and from the rebuff I then gave him I date that enmity which he never forgot, even when I remained plain Blaise de Bernauld and he had blossomed into Monseigneur the Duc de Sully and the first Minister of a King of France!

With half a dozen fellows at my back I went as far as the Cheval Rouge on the Auch Road, a league and a half maybe, and there, in company with a bottle of red wine of Burgundy, waited my gentleman's coming. Nor was my patience greatly tried, for his was the fourth dust-cloud, and if at first he looked a little askance at finding a plain soldier flanked by six pikemen where he thought to find a Court gallant, his mood soon changed. All the same, the start he gave when I greeted him in

Henry's name, and when he saw the glint of the sun on the steel points, told of an uneasy conscience, and a discomfort grew within me. What if the King's guess had hit the nail?

'In the King's name, Monsieur,' I began, my hand upon his saddle—'twas then he started—'a friend's welcome to a friend. He is all impatience to hear more particularly of those in Paris whom he holds so dear.'

'So,' said he, eyeing me closely, 'the King has Madame Marguerite's letter?'

'We call her Queen of Navarre here, if we seek to keep the King's favour,' I answered bluntly, for the fellow's impertinent assumption nettled me.

'Then there are a dozen who call her Margot in Paris,' replied he, with a laugh. 'Some because it is the fashion, and some because—shall I say it?—because she is——'

'A daughter of France,' I broke in. 'We understand all that, Monsieur, and that the Queen is happy in the love of Paris is the King's recompense for her absence.'

'Nay,' said he, sneering, 'not of all Paris. Only some eight or ten of the Court.'

But I had stopped his venomous tongue for that time, and from thenceforward as we rode to Pau we were on less slippery ground.

What I had said to De Clazonay was true enough : we understood to the full his hints and gibes ; and, since the King was no uxorious fool, there seemed to me no good reason for hiding from him what had passed at the inn.

For answer he nodded thoughtfully and tapped me on the shoulder.

‘Confess : which was right, De Bernauld, thou or I ? But to win his game he must play more boldly than to chatter idle hints and Court gossip. Say we shall receive him in the Salle d’Armes before supper. He shall sit at my right, and bid Carrier see that by no evil chance the Count’s hand strays above my wine-cup, though, to be honest, I think he is more cautious than frankly to endanger his own head when some subtler plan will serve his purpose.’

As the dingy grub is to the flaunting butterfly, so was the dusty horseman of the Auch Road to the gay courtier who came smilingly among us as we waited the coming of the King. Such a wealth of silks and laces, plumes and jewels, was, to my mind, out of taste at a Court so poor as that of Navarre, and the display made no friends to the wearer among those honest gentlemen who had stripped themselves to their barest necessities that the King might

have wherewith to keep safe the liberties of the nation. His page was his very miniature, and as the lad minced and strutted behind his master down the hall, a toy blade hanging at his left thigh and a loose packet wrapped in crimson silk flung across his arm, it was hard to say which of the two showed the greater pride.

Yet it is only justice to admit that the fellow carried himself well, and did his mistress no discredit. To his braveries of dress, which—by our younger men, at least—were the more observed because we lacked them, he added a bold carriage and a man's fine figure. If his look was crafty, and his eye overmuch on the alert, excuse might lie in the antagonisms abroad upon the air, and which it was impossible but he must have felt even through their veil of courtesy. Me he had singled out, and with De Rosny and Rohan we formed a group apart, when the great doors at the further end of the salon were flung open and the King entered, alone and dressed with careful simplicity.

It was clear that the manner of it struck De Clazonay. He had looked for an aping of the Louvre, a pinchbeck ceremony, a display of tinsel masquerading as fine gold, a puppet

decked in tawdry grandeur ; and found instead a simple, frank-hearted gentleman, who reigned as King by a different and more Divine right than that of the Valois—the right of a people's love and goodwill.

With no more than passing greetings to right and left, the King came straight towards us.

‘Welcome, Monsieur de Clazonay, mine ancient and very true friend!’ he cried, repeating the exact words of the Queen’s letter, with the contents of which he did not doubt the Count was well acquainted. ‘But that none can be so dear to me as the Queen and our good mother, I would say that this gracious loan of one so high in favour would reconcile me to the loss of Madame Marguerite. ’Tis so they call her in Paris, is it not? That she finds so much of love in the Louvre is my great comfort. Presently, Monsieur, you must tell me of her conquests.’

De Clazonay had fallen on one knee as the King came near, and though the smile never left his face, he felt the irony of the King’s speech through the suave greeting, and his lips tightened across his teeth. He was a cur, Henry had said, and there was the cur’s snarl. More than that, the King’s jeering banter had

angered the cur, and the cur was eagerly alert to bite.

‘The Queen, my mistress, knows my poor worth more nearly,’ he answered, with a great show of humility, ‘and that I may truly win acceptance to your favour, she has made me bearer of a token of her abiding affection to your Majesty.’

With the cur’s snarl still on his lips, and the hard, false smile fixed in his eyes, he made as if to kiss the King’s hand. But, with a mighty show of heartiness, Henry forestalled him and bade him rise.

‘This,’ he said loudly, ‘is a meeting of friend and friend. Let us have none of these stiff courtesies, Monsieur de Clazonay. Gentlemen, I present to the favour of you all my ancient Paris comrade. Let him find through your assistance that Navarre, though small in size, is large of heart.’

Which was very kingly and gracious, and passed muster finely with the crowd, but I noted that, for all his fine words, he never so much as touched the Count’s hand.

‘And the Queen’s gift, Sire?’

‘Ah, true!’ he cried. ‘When was the Queen of France not gracious to Navarre? The list of unpaid debts will be a long one

when the day of requital comes. I beg you to believe and to assure her Majesty that what Navarre lacks is not the heart to pay, but the means. This latest obligation we are under, is it here, Monsieur?’

De Clazonay turned and beckoned to his side the page, and, as I live by bread, the evil look in his face deepened, and his smile grew yet nearer to the cur’s snarl.

‘’Tis but a small thing,’ he said, taking the crimson packet from the boy’s arm, ‘though I call all men to witness that what lies behind the gift is great beyond words.’

‘The love of my good mother?’

‘Ay, Sire, that and all that love wills.’

There was a marble-topped table two yards away, a thing of many colours, of much gilding and glitter. On it De Clazonay placed the packet; then turning, he bowed gravely to Henry, as if to say the Queen’s gift had now passed to the King’s keeping. It was, as I have said, of crimson silk, some twenty inches long by fifteen wide, and tied with silken cords of its own colour. For all his gratitude, the receiver of the gift was in no haste to take possession.

‘The honour has been yours thus far, Monsieur le Comte,’ he said; ‘let the

honour still be yours, and do you unfold the covering.'

Drawing his dagger—a toy affair, all damascene and jewels—De Clazonay cut the cords, and, turning aside the flaps of silk, again bowed. Then he stepped back.

On the table lay a pair of hunting-gloves, and gloves truly worthy of a King's wearing. Their colour was that of the silk, a blood crimson, and from finger-point to wrist the deer-skin of which they were made was as delicately soft, for all its strength, as the most dainty Court lady could desire ; while the deep gauntlet, running almost to the elbow, was stiff and glazed and so narrow as to hug the sleeve. They lay reversed—that is, the one with the palm, the other with the knuckle uppermost—and which would most win the fancy was an open question, the palm being a network of many-coloured silk cords of exceeding fineness to give a grip to the haft of knife or spear, and the back sewn thickly with pearls of large size, gray, smoky, and black.

With his hands behind him and his beard upon his breast, as he had stood that day in the Council Chamber, the King stood over the Paris gloves. 'Margot was shrewder than I guessed,' I heard him murmur, but so low that

had I not been at his elbow and had an inkling of his thought, it would have passed unheeded. Then he beckoned to De Clazonay, and, looking him keenly in the face, said smilingly :

‘Put them on, my friend, that I may better judge the splendour of the Queen’s gift.’

But De Clazonay, who had stepped forward, drew back again, back to the very limits of the narrow circle that stood watching the scene, and, unless I am blind, his face grew gray in the lamplight.

‘Who am I,’ he said, ‘to wear the Queen’s gift before it has even touched the King’s hand? If I so presumed, how could I dare face my mistress’s displeasure?’

‘H’m!’ and Henry nodded his head twice or thrice slowly; ‘humility is a plant of a speedy growth. How could such a slight thing displease so gracious a mistress? Women are very forgiving, Monsieur, whereas I, who am a man, am not to be trifled with when the mood takes me.’ Then he turned to De Clazonay’s page: ‘Wrap these dainties up again, and lay them in my dressing-chamber. Gentlemen,’ and he raised his voice, ‘these are a Queen’s gift; see that no man touch them save myself, lest they be mishandled. Now’—and as if to show that his veiled threat was but an outburst

of momentary irritation, the King took De Clazonay by the arm—‘to supper, Monsieur, and recalling old memories, we will renew old friendships ; then we must plan a hunt further afield than ordinary, that we may do full honour to the Queen’s gift.’

Than Henry of Navarre no man could at will be more winning, more frankly gracious, and the light was back to the Count’s eyes and the flush to his cheeks before his glass had been emptied twice. He was not the first nor the last who sharpened his wits against the King’s to his own wounding. The first step to failure, whether in war or diplomacy, is to despise your enemy.

Later, when the great hall was awhirl with talk and laughter, and De Clazonay the centre of a jesting group, the King sent for me.

‘See to it, De Bernauld,’ said he, the careless smile never so much as flickering on his face, ‘that Marcel, your man, has speech with me when all this folly is over. Let him wait me in my cabinet half an hour before midnight, and let my toughest, speediest horse be standing ready saddled in the courtyard. The fellow is faithful, almost as faithful as thyself, and I must borrow him for eight days. See to it, too, that he is not questioned, whether to-night

or later ; for where and when he rides is the King's business.'

As to the when he rode, it was that night, since thenceforth for something better than a week Marcel was missing ; and when he returned to Pau he returned a sorely weary man, mud-spattered almost out of recognition. As to where he rode I can but guess, for he told me as much of his mission as I asked him, and that was nought.

Thenceforward, too, for eight days the King was strangely busy. Where they came from in little Navarre, those pressing claims of State which filled his mind to the exclusion of all else, was a mystery which even Rosny could not fathom, as great a mystery as the King's sudden zeal and tireless devotion. Such a glutton was he that when affairs of State failed him he called in vexed affairs of Church, and there was not a grievance in all Bearn, Bigorre, Foix, or Navarre, even though it was a twelve-month old, that he did not sift.

' 'Tis a King's business,' he told De Clazonay, who all these days was Henry's shadow, 'to give his life to his subjects, and not to his own pleasuring.' Therefore it follows that in these eight days he did no hunting.

Then, as suddenly as he had assumed the

burden of State he flung it aside, and I noted that the change came after a crumpled letter, sealed both back and front, had been brought him as he sat at supper.

‘We go hunting to-morrow,’ he said to the Frenchman who filled the place by his side, and in a pause in the babel his words travelled down the hall; ‘and, by the grace of fortune, by noon we shall have clipped the claws of the bloodiest wolf that ever ravaged Navarre.’

‘For my part, Sire,’ answered De Clazonay, ‘I hold that craft leads to more clipped claws than does fortune.’

‘Be content’ — and the King laughed — ‘there shall be craft enough. We of Navarre are simple folk, but no fools. The rendezvous is for ten, Monsieur, and in my private cabinet.’

That night, too, Marcel returned to report himself as once more on service, and went asleep on his feet as he spoke.

Acting upon the King's orders, I betook myself to his cabinet at the appointed hour. It was a small and somewhat narrow room situated at the end of a south corridor. To the right were two windows which overlooked the river; opposite these the wall was only broken by a deep fireplace, where, to my great astonishment — it being a warm May day — there burned a

fire of many faggots. At the further end of the room a curtain swept from ceiling to floor.

De Rosny was already in waiting, and as we talked De Clazonay entered, the King at his heels, and followed by a groom of the chamber carrying the famous packet of crimson silk.

‘Leave it there and go,’ said Henry curtly, pointing to the table. ‘Monsieur de Rosny,’ he went on, standing with his back to the hearth, ‘your place is by the window; yours, Monsieur de Bernauld, by the door; yours, Monsieur de Clazonay, there,’ and he motioned with his hand to the end of the table in front of the drawn curtains. A strange prelude this to a day’s sport! But we silently took our places as directed, and then stood in the hush of expectancy, for, saving the King, no man knew what was in the air.

‘Honour for honour,’ he said, bending over the table and slowly unfolding the silken wrappings. ‘How can I better show appreciation of a friend’s services and my love to the Queen, my mother, than by a gift to you, Monsieur de Clazonay?’

‘I am deeply sensible of your goodness, Sire, and most humbly thank——’ began De Clazonay.

But the King stopped him with a gesture

and a curt 'Wait,' and then fell again to unwrapping the silk; and when the coverings were removed, De Clazonay's gratitude was as dead in his heart as on his lips. There was no longer one pair of gloves, but two—and two so strangely similar that none but a wizard could have chosen between them. Alike in colour, in shape, in texture, there was not as much as the varied lustre of a pearl to say which had been the Queen's gift.

'Choose, Monsieur.'

'I, Sire, I?' stammered De Clazonay. 'Such things are for a King's wearing, and not for simple——'

'Ay,' said Henry bitterly, 'I understand you: for a King's wearing!'

Though it was plain the fellow was a villain plotting with his eyes open, and no blind tool, yet I could not but pity him. His face had gone ashen gray, great sweat-drops were on his forehead and standing thickly through the roots of his hair, and, strive as he would, his jaw shook as if smitten by a palsy.

'Choose,' said the King again, 'choose and make an end; the Court goes hunting and waits.'

De Clazonay drew a shuddering breath.

'I will not choose,' he said between the teeth,

clenched to keep them from chattering. 'I will not choose, and you dare not murder me.' And folding his arms, he stepped back from the table.

'Monsieur de Rosny,' and the King's voice was very cold and hard, 'draw back the curtain that Monsieur de Clazonay may choose the better.'

Back came the drapery with a ringing clatter that shook even my nerves, so tense was the strain, and behind it were five soldiers of the guard standing shoulder to shoulder, their steel bare in their hands.

'Choose!' cried the King a third time. 'For by the Lord who made me, you wear these gloves to-day or die where you stand. To kill a poisoner is no murder.'

That the King was stonily in earnest was plain to be seen, and grasping at a straw for life, De Clazonay turned to the table and bent over the gloves, scanning every stitch, every gem, every line and curve. To him it was a veritable lottery of life or death, and at last he pitched upon two and drew them towards him with shaking fingers.

'These, Sire.'

The King turned to me.

'Monsieur de Bernauld, you will ride to-day

by the side of Monsieur de Clazonay. See to it that he does not so much as shift a hand until our return.'

'And if I return, Sire?' cried De Clazonay eagerly, plucking at the gloves with nervous fingers.

'If you return in peace,' said Henry solemnly, 'then God has spoken. Come, Monsieur, glove yourself; the Court waits.'

Turning, he raised the tongs from the hearth, and lifting the remaining pair of gloves, thrust them deep into the bosom of the red embers.

'To horse, gentlemen!' he cried; 'and, De Bernauld, let there be neither mistake nor pity. This is a State matter; see, therefore, that your sword sits light in its sheath. You understand, Monsieur de Clazonay?'

Of that day I will say little, only I pray God I may never see again the sorrows of a tortured soul. As for the gloves, I had the King's orders, and where they were they stayed until we had clattered up the winding causeway that leads from the Gave de Pau to the gate of the Château. Once within the courtyard, my charge was done with, and it was nought to me that De Clazonay shook off the crimson leather from his hands as a man shakes off a hornet. They were as white and smooth from wrist to

finger-tip as when, in all his hunting bravery, he that morning entered the King's cabinet.

‘Pray God all’s well,’ said he, with a deep breath that was almost a groan ; but even as he spoke he stumbled in his walk, pawing the air as a man does in terror of the dark. That night he died.

‘The fool!’ said the King when one told him. ‘Did he think that René had no second pair of gloves, or that Navarre was too poor to pay the price?’

MAN AND MONK

WHEN Marco da Murate was laid to rest at Furvarola, and by grace of a lance-thrust in the throat gave his body that peace it had never known in his turbulent life, there were those who said that Marco the younger would have as bloody an ending, and fewer days to do violence in. His nine years of life had been, from the time he could consciously use his fist, years of strife and passionate self-assertion.

As for Cosimo, he was a pear off another tree, for all that he was twin with Marco. A weakling lath of a lad beside his sturdy brother, he had, said his father's ruffling spearmen, neither wit nor courage enough for aught else than a monk: but then to a spearsman there is but one form of courage.

The bearing of the boys struck the note of their character the day Marco the elder was borne home to Casamaldi. The fiery elder son first burst into a bitter lamentation that was as

much wrath as sorrow ; then, with a too apt adoption of the custom of the age, drew the child's dagger hanging by his side, and on its cross-handle swore to avenge on Nicolo Perenghi the blow which had struck down his father. Cosimo, the younger, grew but a shade paler, biting his lips and clenching his hands until the knuckles showed white ; and for the thirty-six hours in which the coffin lay on the trestle in the great hall he knelt by its head.

‘Soldier and monk,’ said the old squire who had brought home his master’s corpse—‘soldier and monk, and, by Our Lady, Da Murate had need of both, though there is more blood to spill than a boy’s hand can shed, and more prayers to say for that wild soul than a boy’s brain can dream of.’

Had there been any doubt as to their several vocations, the day after Furvarola settled it ; and it was with a steadfast but varying expectation that each looked forward to the playing of his chosen part in the world. In a measure, too, each received the education best fitted to his purpose of life. Marco, hot-blooded and impatient of control, contemptuous of peace and the ways of peace, grew up steeped to the lips in the seething torrent of strife which in his days raged from every mountain to every

plain in Italy. There were a score of captains, past-masters in the practice and theory of war, to school him into knowledge and teach him the art not alone of command but of obedience. The lad of nine, with nothing but his hereditary instinct, had at sixteen become the experienced participant in half a dozen skirmishes. The dagger on which he had sworn his child's oath had grown with his growth, and from little better than a toy symbol of his rank had become a weapon of serious account, and one that had let blood more than once. From his left side it had slipped to his right, and in its place hung a short, narrow-bladed sword, which rested over-lightly in its scabbard.

If Marco was a soldier in all saving strength and stature, Cosimo was already a monk in everything but the vows and the outer garb. As for the jeer at his wit, that was but the cheap gibe of that or any other age at a thing it does not understand ; while, later on, he was to show that, for all his abhorrence of warfare and its ways, he was own son to Marco da Murate.

It was still two years later before the brothers met, and more than ever these two years stamped upon them their differing characteristics, crystallizing their ambitions and their purposes.

The division of the little property left by the dead Marco brought them together. Hitherto Casamaldi had remained under the control of Cosimo's monks, but now Marco the elder was claiming his own, and the time had come for taking an account.

From the monastery, hidden away in a far-off upper ravine, came Cosimo and the Carthusian prior, whose special charge he was ; while Marco swaggered up the winding road from Bologna, attended by half a dozen youths and squires, each as roistering as himself.

Of the two, Cosimo arrived first, and as he crossed the threshold of the room where he had kept vigil, the years fell from him. He was no longer Cosimo the man, but the child facing his first great sorrow. It was as if his father lay where he had lain nine years before, stricken to death. As the child had done, so, under the compulsion of memory, likewise did the man, bowing himself by the empty settle and praying dumbly as the boy had prayed.

He was still on his knees by the settle-head, when there came a clattering of horse-hoofs from the courtyard, the sound of voices raised in careless banter, and the lively note of laughter.

‘By my faith, Marco, hadst thou told us

what a mouldered place thou hast of it up here, thou hadst swallowed the dust these two hours past by thyself. Why, man, the place smells of a cellar, all saving the wine. Ha! there's a good thought behind that. Those monkish friends of thine have many a time a shrewd taste for good liquor. Is there never a soul to bring a Christian the wherewithal to quench his thirst? The great hall lies this way, doth it? Well, shout thou for Pietro, Paolo, whom thou wilt, while we—— Softly, now. A hall, sayest thou? A church, say I, and one must needs doff his bonnet.'

Undisturbed by the approaching voices, Cosimo was still on his knees, with the prior by his side, when Marco and his party entered, halting in a knot by the doorway. Above the shoulders of those who had preceded him the elder brother peered into the apartment.

'Ay, ay,' he said, 'there is the Murate blood. We do nothing by halves, we Murates. A monk is a monk from cowl to sandal, and a soldier a soldier from heart to gauntlet. I'll wager he would pray you out of purgatory as fast as I could send you there.'

For a moment a silence fell upon the party. It was as the other had said, as if they had of a sudden stepped from the heat and noise of

the world into the quiet peace of a sanctuary, and the calm had shamed them into dumbness. Then Marco spoke again, softly, but with a note of bitterness in his voice.

‘By St. Dominic, but the monk is more faithful than the soldier. Cosimo hath done his part, but I have failed. My nine years’ vow hath had no deed to follow it.’

Shouldering his way through the group at the doorway, he was by his brother’s side when Cosimo rose from his knees, and the two faced one another for the first time in nine years. Here again the monk came to the surface.

‘It was for our father, Marco, and for thee ; both then and now.’

‘So,’ said Marco, with his hand on the other’s shoulder, ‘for me. And why?’

‘Because thou art Marco and our father over again in love and the need of prayer.’

The hand slipped from the shoulder round the neck, and the elder brother, drawing the younger to him, turned facing the doorway.

‘Right, Cosimo ; there is, and hath been, need that thou shouldst pray, though there be few have the courage to say so. Hear now a vow to join the other : Who toucheth Cosimo, even by a finger-point, toucheth Marco, and, by St. Dominic ! he had best look to himself,

Father, is there none to give these gentlemen meat and drink while we settle our affairs? They have ridden far, and are both hungry and thirsty. As for Casamaldi and its revenues, if I know Cosimo as well as I do Marco, the matter will not be long in the doing.'

Presently the three were left alone, and as the Carthusian produced from a satchel a voluminous bundle of papers, he said :

'In this matter, Messire, I speak for Cosimo, being to him in a fashion as a father or guardian. Now, if it please you to attend——'

But Marco stopped him.

'Father, let us end this affair shortly. I am no clerk, but Cosimo, I doubt not, writes like an archbishop. Let him take a paper and set down in what words he will : to Marco half, and to Cosimo half. Then——

It was now the turn of the monk to interrupt.

'Not so, my son ; in Cosimo's name I refuse.'

'And rightly, father, rightly,' cried out Marco in haste. 'I had forgotten. To brother and brother share and share is well enough, but there are the nine years' care and thought. To Cosimo, then, three-fourths, to me one-fourth.'

But again the monk shook his head.

‘A second time I say not so, my son ; but to Marco all. Cosimo is one of us, and hath need of nothing. Only, if thou thinkest that thou owest aught, then, in the time to come, bear not too hardly upon us monks. We are but men, and where men are there is failure.’

Marco laughed aloud.

‘The test is a good one,’ he answered, ‘but somewhat dangerous. What if I said “Ay,” and clinched the bargain?’ Then, seeing from his brother’s looks that all was sober earnest, he cried : ‘Wouldst have me branded cozener and rogue, robber of my own flesh and blood? Wouldst have me send out a Murate of Casamaldi to live on charity and beg his bread, even from Heaven? Wouldst have me——’

This time it was Cosimo who stopped the outburst.

‘Brother, there is but one Murate, and he is Marco ; the other will be God’s priest. As for carping tongues, there are those at hand who will silence them, trust us for that.’

And thus, in spite of protestation, the matter ended.

It was when the brothers parted in the courtyard the next morning that the prior spoke out.

Marco had not been ashamed to weep as he bade Cosimo farewell, and now the party, somewhat sobered for their leader's sorrow, sat mounted, waiting the word to spur and ride onward. What Fra Martino said is beside the question, since this story is to show two men as they lived and fought out their lives in an age when to live rightly and fight out a life was even a harder matter than it is now. Nevertheless, as Fra Martino had not been made prior of his community for nothing, it is small wonder there was presently that in their hearts which had not been there since the name of monk had been the easy scoff of the camp.

As for Marco, when one of his fellows thought to pass a jest upon the scene, he had answered :

‘Hold thy peace ! It strikes home to me that there are times when there may be more of man in the monk than in the soldier. A sharp sword, strong arm, and keen eye are much, but which of us all would face his fellows and speak honest truth as yon monk spoke ? Let him be.’

After all, it was no great patrimony which had fallen to the lad. Marco the elder had nursed his prosperity with no careful hand, and so, after his death, years passed before the

neglected vines and ill-tilled soil had recovered power and fertility, and borne sufficient fruit to lay aside even the profit of a few crowns. Now things were better, and Marco the younger carried away from Casamaldi not only a credit upon Luca Simeoni, the Jew banker in Bologna, but also the promise that year by year there would be more crowns to follow.

Cosimo, who, for all his white face, had shed no tears at the parting, was silent for the larger part of the long journey to the Certosa, his lips moving as if in some conflict of the spirit, but without sound of speech. And with that sympathy which was his chief power, Fra Martino, too, had held his peace. At last, as the walls bounding the property of the brotherhood came into view upon the next cross-ridge of the hill, the lad laid his hand on the shoulder of the prior, and said :

‘The battle is won, father ; Marco will be mine at the last ;’ and the pallor passed from his cheeks and the dulness from his eyes.

The next news that came from Bologna was that Marco, impatient of an inactivity which at he most was shortlived, had gone to Modena and joined the Este of his day in an expedition eastward against Ravenna.

Thenceforward for many a month it was

only through Simeoni that tidings of any sort reached the Certosa, and even these scant bruitings of the camp had better have been left without the telling for all the good they did to Marco's reputation.

Taken and patched together, the fragments told a story of riot and license which shamed even the lax notions of the age. The hard-earned crowns of Casamaldi were flung into a vortex of evil passions, squandered upon shameless feasts, and serving no purpose in the world but to hasten and make more assured Marco's destruction in soul and body. To all appearances Cosimo's renunciation had been a fatal error.

When, however, Fra Martino cried out in that bitterness of spirit with which the toiler sees the wreck of his labour, even though the wreck be at another's cost, Cosimo but shook his head and answered back :

‘The right is ever the right, father ; whatever evil may seem to come, nothing can overturn that ; and as I told thee once, Marco is mine without a doubt, not now perhaps, nor next year, nor the next, but surely mine. Would God lie, and to a soul in trouble ?’

Against such faith what could the prior do but keep silence ?—groaning none the less in his

heart, since at times faith comes harder to the experience of the old.

Three years and more had gone on in this fashion when Simeoni himself appeared at the Certosa. His news was not long in the telling, and he minced no words.

‘The tether is run out,’ he said; ‘and he would fain sell Casamaldi.’

‘Let him sell, then!’ cried the prior. ‘Let him sell! So much less labour to us.’

‘Ay, that’s very well,’ answered the Jew; ‘but a man must needs be cautious, dealing—saving your presence—with such cattle as Messire Marco. I touch no stick of Casamaldi unless this friar of yours, his brother, joins in the deed.’

‘There is no need,’ said the priest, ‘since Cosimo hath no share in Casamaldi. That hath been resigned long ago. Why hurt the lad, as hurt him it will to give his father’s house to strangers, though the act be but a form?’

‘Resigned is well enough’—and Simeoni nodded his head with the grim smile of bitter experience—‘but when I have paid good crowns to Messire Marco, what prevents Father Cosimo—no offence, you understand—what prevents Father Cosimo saying, “Resigned? Show me the papers”?’

‘What, thou Jew, dost thou dare——’

Simeoni solemnly wagged his forefinger in the prior’s face.

‘Men are men,’ he said; ‘and, with respect, not even a white frock can alter that,’ and was obdurate till at last the priest cried out:

‘If you will have it so, ask him, and I pray the saints he says “No” roundly, and so balks this ill-conditioned spendthrift.’

Later, when Simeoni put the matter to Cosimo, the latter answered him neither yea nor nay, but simply: ‘Where, then, is Marco?’ nor to any urging would he give any other answer.

And when it appeared that Marco waited down yonder in Bologna to know the result of the Jew’s mission, Cosimo brushed all talk aside, and said:

‘If face to face Marco wills it, then we shall see; but as yet there is nought to be said,’ and set himself to return with Simeoni.

It was in vain that the prior sought to dissuade him.

‘Why borrow sorrow, my son, and what else but grief and shame have ever come of this hot-blooded brother of thine? Say “Ay,” and have done with it, or, better still, say “Nay,” and let Marco shift for himself.’

For the prior was still sore over his wasted labour.

‘Nay, but Marco is Marco still, and for what else is a brother but to cling to a brother? Who knows but the old tales they told grew in the telling? for that is the world’s way.’

‘Small growth,’ said Simeoni, ‘saving downwards, for Marco is an ill man to cross, and a soft truth can save a hard blow.’

‘Then,’ cried Cosimo sharply, ‘hold thou thy peace, lest he cross thee—if he deem, indeed, a Jew worth the crossing.’

They were therefore an ill-assorted pair when, with Simeoni’s hired guard, they presently turned valleywards, the Jew fuming that a half-made priest should so have spoken to him, yet fearing to resent it, since the keeping of his temper meant money; Cosimo, on his part, wroth with Simeoni for his blunt contempt, and still more wroth with himself for being wroth.

In the end the nobler wrath got the upper hand, and, turning to his companion, he prayed his pardon if he had said aught that was unseemly; but, indeed, Marco was his dear brother, and doubtless Master Simeoni would forgive a hot word repented of as soon as spoken. A speech which, being without precedent in his experience, coming as it did from

one so near the intolerance of the priesthood, so affected the Jew that he actually put aside his own interest in the matter in hand.

‘See you,’ he said, ‘I know this Casamaldi. The work of the padres up yonder is bearing fruit, and rapidly now. In three years the land will be worth double its price. Therefore, have nought to do with this sale by Messire Marco. Ay, ay; a brother’s a brother, but three years are a short span in which to turn two crowns to four. Bid him wait. If he asks reasons, one reason is as good as ten. Say thou art under a vow, or what not: I never knew a good man yet but could frame a politic answer when a reservation of the truth was to his purpose.’

For which advice Cosimo thanked him courteously enough, but would give no pledge.

It was three days later when the brothers met in Simeoni’s inner room, ‘the spider’s den,’ as some called it, where many a shrewd battle had been fought between the unequal forces of blustering necessity and obsequious but hard-held wealth.

‘Let him hear nought of my coming,’ Cosimo had said; and now he waited by the Jew’s table with his face turned three-parts from the door, for no other reason but that he might by



a shrewd guess learn to know his brother as the years had made him.

When Marco came it was in all his glory of fine clothing, silks and laces. Cold steel and leather jackets were well enough for the camp, and there none wore them with a better grace ; but here in Bologna he must ruffle it with the best, whether there were crowns or no crowns.

‘Well, Israel-ben-Iscariot!’ he cried, flinging his feathered cap on the table, ‘is that uneasy conscience of thine at rest? Hath that monk brother of mine put himself to his natural uses, for, by St. Dominic, I know of naught——Saints! it is Cosimo himself. A pretty trick, by my faith!—a very pretty trick, and well worthy the concoction of a Jew and a friar.’

Cosimo had risen while the other was speaking.

‘No friar as yet, Marco, but a brother in love and service. Where foundest thou the right to talk like that?’

And leaning his hands on the other’s broad shoulders, he shook him slightly.

Marco’s face softened.

‘Why, it’s the same Cosimo as of old.’

‘Ay,’ said Cosimo, ‘but not the same Marco.’ Softly Luca Simeoni slipped to the door.

‘I think, Messires, there is that to be said

which is better said alone,' and shut himself without.

A discreet man, Simeoni, and one who spoke not all his mind ; for as he clattered down the passage, making it echo with his tread, so that they who were left within might understand there was no listening at the door, he thought : ' If I know aught of men, Casamaldi is mine for all my blunt speech, but the surer mine for my absence, since Marco hath a proud temper and would scorn benefits before a Jew.'

What passed was never fully known, but later it was guessed that if Cosimo had not fought hard for the house of his father, he had at the least let Marco see his abhorrence of the alienation, though in the end the power of brotherhood had conquered.

When Simeoni re-entered the room it was Marco who was by the table, his head sunk upon his arms, while Cosimo bent above him.

' If thou wert with me always, it would not be as the past has been,' the elder was saying.

' Ay,' said Cosimo softly, and his fingers stole up from the shoulder into the curls about the neck as he spoke ; ' I know. Satan hath desired thee, that he might sift thee as wheat, and on some his desire is a thing of course ; but I have prayed——'

Then he stopped.

It was the Jew who broke the silence.

‘What then, Messires, of Casamaldi?’

‘What hast thou to do with Casamaldi?’ answered Cosimo. ‘That is the care of Murate.’

But Simeoni knew there was a use for his crowns, and in this Wisdom was justified of her child.

‘The care of Murate!’ cried Marco, looking up. ‘Ay, so it must be. Cosimo, I will borrow——’

‘H’m, a good thought, if a trifle late,’ said Simeoni. ‘But who will lend? Bargains are two-handed.’

Again Cosimo’s hand passed caressingly over the other’s head.

‘No more of it, Marco,’ he said. ‘Better sell than pledge with no hope of redemption, and so fret body and soul alike. Where are thy papers, Simeoni? Ready, I’ll be bound, for all thy counsel at Casamaldi. Nay, never look aside, man; trade is trade, and honourable enough. Better thou shouldst profit than another.’

As the Jew left the room, Cosimo stooped and drew Marco to him with the tenderness of a woman.

‘Marco, my brother Marco, the road seems

long at times, and faith far off, and yet, and yet——’

Marco looked up uncomprehendingly into the face bent over his.

‘Come thou with me, then,’ he said. ‘With thee by me, the road would be easy enough, and all go well.’

‘Nay, but I think it is thou who wilt come to me,’ answered Cosimo, ‘but when I know not. The papers, Master Simeoni? There, that is clerkly done. For thee, Marco, a dagger-hilt mark is more in keeping than a monkish scrawl. And now, my brother, is it farewell for another five years?’

Marco looked up from the parchment, where he was laboriously tracing a sign manual.

‘Not farewell!’ He put out his hand to grip the other’s sleeve. ‘Thou and I, Cosimo, must have many a day together.’

‘A pretty couple we would make,’ answered Cosimo, shaking his head; ‘thy gay silks and my sober stuffs. Within an hour thou wouldst be ashamed of my dinginess. Ay, a protest’s a protest, but I am not such a fool of the world and its ways as thou thinkest. Farewell, my Marco. But there is one thing on my conscience. Though no friar yet, I know there is that which brother should speak to brother

without fear or shame, and yet my foolish tongue is tied. Who am I, to cry out on folly?’

Marco, who had risen, put his hand on his brother’s mouth for answer.

‘Let the past be till thou art a monk, and then it will be the Church which speaks, and not Cosimo. And, look you,’ he went on, ‘when a man hath his blood hot, either by fatherhood or wine, or—or—what your monkship knoweth little about, it is not he who plays the fool, but——’

‘The devil within him,’ broke in Cosimo sorrowfully.

‘Ay, why, so it is. Then put the curse on the devil, and not on him.’

‘Never a curse on thee, Marco.’

Marco laughed. His easy repentance was forgotten.

‘Thou art a good fellow,’ he said, ‘and a dash of fire would make thee as good a monk as I am a soldier. Fire never hurt a man yet. By St. Dominic! with thee in the Church and me in the camp, and a stroke of luck to one or other, we’ll make the Murates heard of yet. Dost remember the oath at Casamaldi? Nicolo Perenghi hath a long tether. These four years past I have followed him hither and thither, but

it hath been the hunting of a Will-o'-the-wisp. Now he is at Modena, now at Ferrara, now south at Massa. Once I rode into Imola by the east gate as he rode out by the north. But the vow's a vow, ay, and the other oath, too, and both hold. See thou to me for the next world, Cosimo, and I'll see to thee for this, for all my wanderings, though I trow thou hast the heavier end of the bargain to carry.'

'The lad hath sound sense,' quoth Marco to himself, as he strode along to his inn ten minutes later. 'His sober gown and monkish ways would ill assort with our lads yonder. A quiet corner once a day to keep civil tongues in their heads by ministration of a long sword would have been the least of it, and if I got so much as a scratch, Master Monk would have howled.'

Six months later there was no longer a Cosimo da Murate. He was lost under the white Carthusian robe of Fra Ugo.

To follow the story of Marco da Murate for the next ten years would be to follow the story of a soldier of fortune living solely by a none too scrupulous sword.

The crowns gained by the sale of Casamaldi were soon swallowed, following with even greater speed the road taken by the minority

accumulations. These gone, and the appetite having been but whetted by their use, needs must that the purse be filled.

In times of warfare—and these were mostly times of warfare—a man like Da Murate was worth his price, and upon the hire of his sword he could ruffle it with the rest. At such times, too, there were pickings : loot, or a prisoner's ransom, and so provision might have been made for the rusting days of peace and inactivity. But Marco's purse was as large in the mesh as wide in the mouth, and gold pieces slipped out as quickly as in, so, when the inevitable pinch came, necessity forced him into the more doubtful bypaths of the profession of arms, bypaths through which no man passed but some of the mud clogging the road went with him. Forays that were little better than brigandage on a large scale, though under the authority of noble patronage ; a private vengeance, perilously near cold-blooded assassination ; even the abduction of a none too willing bride—these and their kind filled up alike the days of peace and his purse.

Through all the chops and changes of the years, Nicolo Perenghi was never forgotten. No doubt the lapse of time dulled the keen edge of Marco's animosity, and besides, ' a man

must live,' he told himself; and where there were crowns to fill his pockets, thither for very life's sake went Marco.

At length, after ten years had passed, their paths met; and, of all places fitted to rekindle Marco's smouldering fires of vengeance, they met in the hills above Casamaldi.

It must be doubted whether it was pure brotherhood that drew Marco up the long windings to the Certosa, seeing that, on his side, at least, pure brotherhood had slept comfortably for so many years, and never once stirred itself to the wakening.

He had tied up his horse beneath a group of great chestnuts fronting a small wine-house betwixt his wasted heritage and the monastery, and had seated himself in the shade of the porch, with a flagon of what was most likely Casamaldi wine at his elbow.

With the sinking of the wine in the flagon rose the bitterness in his heart. It was the thought and realization of his own past folly that influenced him rather than the liquor, though it was heady enough, and inflamed him, so that he was ready to clutch at any excuse to turn his self-recrimination on another.

Under the same group of chestnuts was tethered another horse, and in Marco's wrathful

mood it was no light injury that his beast—his, a Da Murate of Casamaldi—was so much the inferior.

Presently the door of the inn was pulled open, and two men, the host and a stranger, came out.

‘Ay,’ said the one, ‘it is good wine, and, as you say, Messire Perenghi, none the worse for being of Simeoni the Jew’s making. Now I remember——’

It was Marco who broke into the landlord’s recollections, thrusting him aside with a strong hand and an uncourteous strength while he fronted the stranger.

‘Messire Perenghi?’ he said. ‘Not Messire Nicolo Perenghi who fought at Furvarola better than a score of years ago?’

There was that in Marco’s face which made the other reach round towards his sword-hilt.

‘Ay, suppose so,’ he answered, ‘what then?’

‘Then, Messire, we had best step aside a little, for the son of Marco da Murate hath somewhat to say.’

Perenghi laughed.

‘By my faith, it hath kept five-and-twenty years or thereabouts, and lost nothing for the want of saying; let it keep five-and-twenty more;’ and he turned towards the chestnuts.

Marco's face reddened at the sneer.

'A fox is slow to trace,' he said; 'but when we catch it we kill it.'

Round on his heel swung Perenghi.

'Have it so!' he cried. 'Let a second Da Murate go the road of the first, though it ill becomes you and me to bicker thus like callow boys, who think themselves the braver for big words. Host, see to the horses, and then for thy peace' sake keep indoors.'

As if by consent, the two turned uphill, where gleams of green seen between the tree-trunks gave promise of a stretch of level ground. It was a small clearing, bordered at the further end by a short slope, above which rose a small—probably a votive—church, newly built since the days of Marco's childhood, and dedicated to St. Dominic.

'Ha!' he cried, as he read the inscription above the door, 'my patron saint, and an omen for good. The very spot! Good wine below there for him who shall have a thirst to quench, and the keeping of the saints for him who shall have none.'

'Be it so,' answered Perenghi; 'but for me, I say better a sure sword than a score of saints. And now one word, which, being the man I am, I have no fear any shall call me a coward for

the saying. If I struck Murate down, it was in the press of the *mêlée*, and in fair fight. Is it for that you would cut my throat, or for the sake of the boy's hot and hasty oath ?'

Marco flung his cap on the grass.

'Must I smite you on the mouth ?' was all his answer.

'Be it so,' said Perenghi a second time, drawing ; then, pointing his sword at the cross on the façade of the chapel, he added : 'Bear witness this quarrel is not of my seeking.'

They were an even match. Both had learned sword-play in the same school of rough experience, and Marco's rage, heated by the wine he had drunk, neutralized the advantage of his twenty years of youth. A good servant, passion was a bad master, and drove him into such a wild anger, such a reckless, Berserk fury of attack, as more than once almost to place the issue in the hand of his opponent.

In the end, it was fortune and not skill that gave the younger man his opportunity. Perenghi had parried a thrust in tierce, and lunging back, slipped on a fallen chestnut burr, and for an instant staggered.

Backward he sprang beyond reach, but Marco's blade had caught his, and, by a trick of fence learned in the Ravennese wars, snapped

it a few inches above the guard. The very force of the blow staggered Marco in his turn; but Nicolo Perenghi had time to read the murder in his eyes, and wheeling, he sped across the glade and up the slope to the chapel, still grasping the broken sword.

With a howl that was both cry and curse Marco sped after him. Midway up the slope he came, as he thought, within striking distance, and slashed savagely at the flying man; but the blow failed in its purpose, inflicting only a slight flesh wound in the other's arm as he swung himself aside. Marco's effort was Nicolo Perenghi's safety, for in reaching forward he missed his footing on the dry grass and slipped backwards down the slope. As he recovered he saw the light curtain draping the chapel door flung aside and Perenghi disappear within.

'Neither hell nor St. Dominic shall save thee!' he cried, and, panting in his breath, again rushed onward, expecting each moment to have the doors thrust-to in his face. He was on the very steps with his hand outstretched to tear the curtain from its fastening, when the rings rattled on the bar and the white robe of a Carthusian friar blocked the entrance. In his mad rage Marco lowered his sword-point to the

level of the monk's breast, and drew back his arm to strike.

'Stand aside!' he cried, 'or by all the saints there will be two—— What? Cosimo? thou, thou?' and he paused, still holding his sword at the charge.

'Nay,' cried the monk back, in a voice as full of menace as his own had been. 'Not Cosimo, but God's priest. Stand thou aside. Thou art done with the brother, and as thou thyself hast said, thou hast the Church to face. I tell thee, as priest of God, Marco da Murate, that hell gapes for thee; its smell is on thy garments. What? Was the measure of iniquity not yet full with rapine, lust, and slaughter that thou must needs add sacrilege to murder, and seek to steep God's own altar in the blood of God's own image?

'In bygone years the brother bore with the brother's spoliation of his house and the trampling on its honour; ay, the very uprooting of a father's name and the planting in of a stranger. That was brother to brother—Cosimo to Marco; but now the brother is dead, and it is the Church that speaketh. Another inch, and I pray with all the power of my soul that God strike thee. Ay, and He will strike thee, for the measure of iniquity is full to running

over, and hell is but a hand's-breadth from thee.

‘Begone, Marco da Murate, and give thyself to repentance—if, indeed, there is yet time, for God groweth impatient!’

Leaving the curtain still drawn back, he turned, and in the dim light Marco saw him bend above Nicolo Perenghi as he knelt prostrate on the altar-steps.

With a rage in his heart none the less bitter for its impotence and repression, Marco returned to the wine-house, and calling for his horse, paid his reckoning with scant thanks, mounted, and rode slowly down the path to the valley. The excitement was spent, and in its place was a sullen resentment. Brotherhood, the other had said. Brotherhood, forsooth! If there had been obligations of brotherhood, truly they were wiped out now, and his debt to Cosimo was acquitted in full.

‘Cosimo? H’m, Cosimo? *Not* Cosimo,’ he said, ‘but God’s priest—God’s priest—God’s curse—a plague upon the man’s sharp tongue! Had he held to his saints, it had been a lighter matter.’ Marco had cared little for the saints for hard upon a score of years, but this was another thing.

Plague take the horse, with its jerky stride

down the hill! It seemed to pound in the words with its hoof-beats on the rocky path: God's priest—God's curse—priest and curse—priest and curse. Was it the wine or the sun that had set his brain a-smouldering? for truly there was a strange fire in it. Not the leaping fire of the struggle in the glade, but a withering, smothering heat, so that his brain lay in his skull like hot brass. Or had Cosimo's curse struck home already? Hell but a hand's-breadth off, he had said; God's priest—God's curse—God—God—God! Not the saints: they were but little and could be placated; but God, God Himself. This thing came newly home to Marco.

It was a dazed and broken man who an hour later rode into the little courtyard of the inn at the foot of the hill, and rolled out of his saddle more like some drunken lout than a spurred knight.

When Marco come to himself a week later he was but a wreck in strength, though the weight had gone from his head and the heat from his brain, and there was no longer fever in his blood. For another week he lay slowly regaining his lost powers of body and mind, piecing together the past and out of it building much that was ugly to think upon. Then he

took a resolve, and bade the woman of the inn send for Cosimo da Murate.

‘Cosimo da Murate?’ She shook her head; there was no Da Murate in valley or hill that she knew of, nor had been these seven years.

‘Cosimo da Murate,’ persisted Marco; ‘he who is priest of the little chapel below the Certosa.’

‘Ah! Fra Ugo—a spare, straight man with eyes that saw your soul, and thin lips that spoke so much of kindness to the poor. Fra Ugo, Messire?’

‘Ay,’ said Marco grimly; ‘the eyes are right enough, and you see your own soul in them. Send for Fra Ugo, and God grant the rest be true likewise, for there are few more needy than I!’

As his strength had grown and the pulse of the blood beat fuller, there had been a return of the horror which had beset him on the hill-side, but born this time not of fever but of memory. With every hour the conviction was confirmed, needs must that he see Cosimo. Surely the power which had cursed could also bless, and the priest of God the Judge was priest of God the Father also. Therefore, needs must that he see Cosimo.

When Fra Ugo came in haste, knowing nothing but that a sick knight sought his

comfort, and saw Marco stretched upon the bed, white, and still gaunt with sickness, his first impulse was to turn away in wrath. There had been some fresh outrage, he thought, some new loosing of lawless passion bringing its own well-deserved vengeance in its train. But the monk's instinct of charity conquered the man's anger, and he paused.

From the bed Marco thrust out a shrunken, beckoning hand.

'Fra Ugo,' he said, and stopped, the words or the thought which underlay them choking him.

Two words only, but enough to make the priest's heart leap and to bring a dimness to his eyes. It was the priest, then, that was wanted, and not the brother.

He caught firm hold of the shaking hand, and as he held it fast the uncertain voice came again.

'Fra Ugo, take me, and make me whatsoever thou and thy God wilt.'

With a cry that was a groan, it so rent him in the outburst, the monk flung himself on his knees by the bed.

'Thou hast come to me, Marco, my brother—thou hast come to me by a way that I dreamed not of, and at a time when I despaired.

Sorrow for a night—ay, long was the night!—but joy in the morning.'

And he broke into a passion of tears such as he had not wept over the body of his father.

That night the two were brothers as they had not been since childhood.

'Thou wert ever the stronger soul,' said Marco. 'Remember how I said there was more man in the monk than in the soldier. And now thou wilt make me one of you, that these scorching fires may die out. Oh, the terror of them, Cosimo! the terror of them!'

But Fra Ugo shook his head.

'Thou art sick,' he said; 'sick in mind as in body. Wait till both be strong and thou hast tried thyself, lest worse befall us both. The quenching of fires comes from within, and not from the putting on of a frock.'

So for a week they waited, Marco growing in power every hour. Then came a day when he said:

'Bid them bring my horse that I may ride for the last time up to the Certosa. A second time, I say, make me one of you, Cosimo, that I may have peace.'

But again the priest shook his head.

'God seeks not terror, but repentance,' he said. 'Love born of fear hath a short life and

brings no willing service with it. Wait till thou art sure.'

'Man, man!' cried Marco, 'what knowest thou of the lures of the devil? Bid me *not* wait. Or, see now, give me but a cave on the hill-top and bid me wait there as a lay brother, that there may be a hope before me. Dost thou fear my steadfastness? See, I will break my sword, and if thou knowest aught of man, thou wilt know that he who breaks a sword as loved as I have loved mine will never look back.'

The wistfulness of a keen heart-hunger was in the priest's eyes as he answered:

'Thou hast conquered; only break not the sword, but keep it and hang it in thy cell. If there comes the thought of turning back, it will remind thee of what thou hast been.'

Through ten years' watchful love and unflinching faithfulness, Fra Ugo had won for himself a reverence in the hearts of rich and poor alike. No misery had been too wretched for his love, and there never was a time when misery was more wretched than then. But also, as no state, however arrogant, could awe him into silence when wrong-doing was to be rebuked, so no wretchedness palliated crime.

But what it had taken the monk ten years

to win, Marco the hermit gained in as many months.

‘No change of name for me,’ he had said : ‘Marco I was, Marco I will be to all the world, lest those who knew me of old cry out upon me for a coward seeking shelter under a disguise.’

Where the ridge of the hill was roughest he had chosen an angle in the rocks, stretched two beams across it, and thatched it lightly with boughs, leaving the front open towards the south. Against the wall of rock which first met his eyes on waking he had hung his naked sword to rest and rust. Here, with the earth as bed and a rolled-up cloak as pillow, Marco the hermit passed such of his nights as were not given up to the nursing of some of the many miserable among the vine-dressers of the hills.

His days were full enough. As has been said, what took Fra Ugo ten years to accomplish, Marco did in as many months. He was a man who knew men, and had no need of time to teach him their sins, their follies, and their wretchedness ; all these, in ten times deeper degree—sorrows, sufferings, frailties—he had learnt in a score of years of soldiering, the most perfect of all schools in which to study the complexity of contradictions which goes to make up man.

Naturally, the transition from Marco the soldier to Marco the lay-friar had not passed unmarked. For a week it had been the jest of the circle he had quitted, the target for barbed gibes such as he himself would have uttered a month before, then the bruitings of an advance of the Florentines upon the city drowned the laughter. In six months Marco the soldier was forgotten, but in six more Marco the hermit was better remembered than had ever been Marco the soldier.

Two years passed, in which his influence grew daily, grew so that, had it been the era of revolutions from below, he could have taken rank with Campanella and Bassi, or any of the many patriot priests who have given their lives for freedom in the last half-century—two years, in which the brothers' lives grew the one into the other with a love that was something greater than that of brother and brother—a love that was as much kinship of soul and spirit as of heart and blood. Once Cosimo—for between the two it was Cosimo once more, and no longer Fra Ugo—touching the sword, seamed and brown with rust, said:

‘Thy life began when its life ended.’

And it was with something like a sigh that Marco had answered:

‘But an unworthy life for us both ; it in its time, I in mine, not but what it could strike a stout blow yet for all its rust, if only there were need.’

‘Then ye are a pair,’ Cosimo replied ; ‘the heart sound for all the roughenings of the world’ ; but his face had darkened at the other’s reply, and he added : ‘I was a fool to bid thee keep the thing. Break it across, lest the blade whisper thee to a sudden fury, as the North-men say the spirit of it doth at times.’

Marco shook his head.

‘That were cowardice, and, besides, the spirit is dead these two years past.’

‘Then promise,’ urged Cosimo, ‘that whatsoever cometh thou wilt never strike blow with it again.’

And Marco promised readily enough. What had he to do with sword-strokes ?

It was a week later that, as Marco picked his way down the path built for himself from the upper ridge where lay his hermitage, he was met by a vine-dresser of Casamaldi. Breathless from the haste which he had made, the man was almost inarticulate.

‘Messire Marco’—the title clung to him for all his lay brotherhood—‘the Fra, Fra Ugo——’

Where the tongue is dumb, the eyes and face are tell-tales, and a message of ill is no hard thing to read.

A light that was ugly to see shot into Marco's eyes as he gripped the man's shoulder with a pressure which left its print for many a day.

'What of the Fra, fool? Quick, and waste no speech!'

Still panting in his breathlessness, the man took Marco at his word, and gasped:

'The Fra—it is evil news—the Fra—is struck—dead.'

Up swung Marco's other hand until he held the vine-dresser as in a twin vice.

'Dead!' It was the howl of a wild beast rather than the cry of a man. 'Dead—Fra Ugo? Where gottest thou that fool's lie?' and all unconscious of his violence, he still tighter clenched his grip on the other's shoulders, shaking him the while.

'No fool's lie, Messire, but the truth.'

'How? Where? How knowest thou the Fra is dead?'

'We three——'

'What three, man?'

'A stranger and I and the Fra, there by St. Dominic's. These two on the steps, I below. The stranger thrust the Fra from him by the shoulder; why, I know not; there had

been words perchance. The Fra spun round and fell, and the Fra is dead.'

'Dead? How knowest thou?'

'The Fra slipped, and the steps—his skull. Best ask no more, Messire; thou hast seen an axe-stroke in battle. Then, the stranger——'

'Ay, what of him?'

'Nicolo Perenghi, as the Fra called him——'

'Nicolo Perenghi?' The howl rose to a true beast's cry now, sharp, shrill, and savage. 'Nicolo Perenghi again? Art sure, man?—sure?'

'You are killing me, Messire. What have I done? It was so the Fra called him. I know no more.'

With a spasm of the muscles rather than a conscious violence, Marco tumbled the man in a heap by the pathway, then turned and ran at his full speed back to his hermitage, tore the rusted sword from its hanging-place, and was disappearing in the timber fringing the upper slopes before the fallen man could stagger to his feet.

His brain was already on fire with the same hell's lust for man's blood which had possessed him the day he crossed swords with Perenghi. The almost-forgotten vows sworn at Casamaldi and renewed in Simeoni's banking-room were sounding in his ears, hounding him to a hotter

fury. Woe to the slayer of his father! woe to him who touched Cosimo! And now the two woes were linked in one, centred on the one head. Death to Nicolo Perenghi!—death! And in his flight he kissed the rusted hilt of the sword with a fresh dedication.

That Cosimo was dead was now second in his thoughts; that Perenghi lived came first. Down the hill he sped, his robe looped to his knees and caught up in his left hand, while the right held the sword aloft. Down the hill—down, down, the heat of the thirst for blood glowing more furiously with every panting breath; round his head in his mad rage he swept the sword till it whistled in its circuits. The spirit was awake, and called him to slaughter; then, chill upon the heat of his passion came the memory of the promise made to the dead.

The pledged word of a Murate! And for an instant he stopped in his course, choking with the conflict and revulsion of thought. The word of a Murate? Bah! Was not his oath, too, his word? Ay, and twice pledged—word against word, oath against promise. The oath was the greater. And again on he sped.

There, at last, was the chancel end of St. Dominic's gray chapel through the tree-stems. What lay beyond? A double venge-

ance—God's justice and man's revenge—and he drew a deeper breath for all his haste. Round by the northern side he skirted, and on into the space fronting the west side of the chapel—on, with the sword heaved up and ready to strike. Below the steps lay Cosimo, outstretched as if in sleep, and by his head, bowed in prayer, was Nicolo Perenghi.

At the sound of the hurrying feet he raised his head.

‘At last,’ he said. ‘I have been waiting for thee.’

Panting from his haste, Marco stood above him with the sword still poised, and looked from the sorrowful face of the living to the not more placid face of the dead.

Perenghi's cap had been flung aside as he bent in prayer.

‘God above knows this was not meant,’ he said; ‘but strike and let blood wipe out blood.’

From the dead Marco looked back to the living, then to the rusted sword heaved up above his head. For an instant the blade wavered in the air, then with all his power he flung it upon the steps, splintering it.

‘He would have it so,’ he said.

And when Michele the vine-dresser stole trembling round the church, there were two who knelt praying by Fra Ugo.

HOW MARTIN HUGHES FOUND MANOA-LAND

THE days were the days when England built up her greatness out of a grain of ignorance, a bushel of courage, and an all-pervading leaven of restlessness. Without the first not even the other two would have given her stomach and impulse enough to have faced the forces of Spain at home and in the West. Without the second the other two had shaped but little of the world's history ; and lacking the third, the heart of England had never flung itself beyond seas, seeking out El Dorado, Manoa, and all the gilded shadows of the age, and finding in the shadows something of an abiding substance.

Compound of all three, as became his age, was Martin Hughes, shipwright, of the port of Rye in the county of Sussex.

The comfortable lie disposed of at Patay,

Formigny, and Zutphen, the last at the expense of England's Marcellus—that one Englishman, by reason simply of being an Englishman, was the equal of two Frenchmen, three Spaniards or five Portugee—was to him an article of faith, wherein may be seen the grain of ignorance helping to build up the greatness.

Though the Armada had come and gone these seven years, those midsummer days were fresh enough in memory to set a seal on such a faith; and God-fearing man as was Martin Hughes the elder, the story of the long Channel fight had lost nought in the telling, whether in the odds to be overcome or in the dogged courage that overcame the odds. 'Twas God Almighty fought for England, and a right thing, too, seeing that England fought for God Almighty; and in coupling the one with the other, he spoke in all honesty and reverence.

Of the traditions of these days Martin Hughes the younger was bubbling full, and when all's said and done, it was wholesome meat on which to feed both mind and spirit. In such simple faith men drew the nearer to their God, and held the honour of their country shrined the higher, since the one and the other were interwoven. The Little Englander of these latter days would in those have had a

shorter shrift than rope, and more hands to hang than hearts to pity.

The seven years were years of packed life ; years of defence, attack, strength, growth, development ; and with the years Martin the younger grew, knitting into his fibre the loves, the hates, and the restlessness of the age, but chiefly to fear God, revere the Queen, and hate the devil and the King of Spain. And with the knitting of the sterner stuff came, as has come in all generations, the knitting of those softer loves, those hopes, those fears which make or mar the man, even as the sterner do the nation.

Then, as now, craftsmen worked by families in a single groove. It was enough that Martin Hughes the elder had been a shipwright, that Martin Hughes the younger should be a shipwright also. And in like fashion, it was a thing of nature that a father and son should serve a father and son generation by generation, if the kinship of fellow-craftsmen in those days could be called servitude.

Since the York and Lancaster days there had always been a Ned Barriscote and a Martin Hughes, master and servant, until at length it now had come that the entail of craft-kinship was broken, and there remained only a Martin Hughes and a Mary Barriscote. In such a

case the problem of life hath a holy, a gracious and a natural solution ; and Martin Hughes had willingly found a dearer and a yet more ready servitude, had not one of Drake's men fared round by Rye and spoilt it all.

It was the time of beating up recruits for that last unhappy venture of a venturesome life, and the restlessness of the age was in Martin Hughes but as so much tow waiting a spark and puff of breath.

Both came from tarry Peter Morgan, able seaman, and still more able liar, in the service of Admiral Drake. The spark was a jeer at the stay-at-home lads who, when Spain's back was broken, hung off from snapping her neck too, and the puff of breath stirred in every windy tale of the piled-up ingots, unstrung pearls, and outlandish jewels hidden away south of the west for the first searcher to find. Oh, the wonder of the things Peter Morgan had just by a hair's-breadth missed the seeing !

As the magnet draws steel, so does gold draw a man ; and when Peter Morgan told of El Dorado, Manoa, and their fellows the glittering fables of the day, Martin Hughes laid down axe and chisel and swore he'd face Manoa-land, though he sought until he died.

His mind made up and closed tight as wax

against argument, he naturally, manlike, set to work to prove himself in the right. Rye was no longer the Rye of old days. Trade had slipped westward there to Portsmouth, ay, and still further, round to Plymouth. That was Drake and Hawkins's doing, and now Drake must be made to pay for Drake. All of which, as to the trade, Mary knew full well.

'But,' quoth she, being a shrewd lass, 'will it not slip away the faster, you being gone? Such a thing is hard to hold in a woman's hands.'

Then Martin, being more nimble with his hands and head than with his tongue, shifted ground, talking 'Peter Morgan' as if it had been Martin Hughes's own thought.

'A shame,' he said, 'now Spain's under heel, not to crush the life out once and for all. Leave her another five years, and it's a second Armada we'll see sweeping up the Channel. Cut off supplies and so starve her, and England's safe.'

'Ay, ay!' said Mary, 'and who put that fine thought in Martin Hughes's brain? Not Martin Hughes, I'm thinking.' Which, while it was not argument, showed that Mary Barriscote had a shrewd head on her shoulders, and could go cruelly to the truth for all her love, or, perhaps, by reason of her love, that being a

fashion of woman. 'Well enough to singe the King of Spain's beard at Nombre de Dios, but who's to fend the maids at home from the bruising of the King of Spain's fists?'

'Tut, lass!' said Martin, out of his point of cardinal faith. 'What England's done England 'll do again, though Drake, Hawkins, and Martin Hughes be beyond seas. And 'tis but a year, or two, or three, and the gold of Manoa 'll pay for all.'

Whereat Mary did what she should have done at the first, and fell to crying quietly behind her fingers.

'And how am I to live at home without you a year, or two, or three, ay, or all my life, you being dead beyond seas? Tell me that, Martin Hughes?'

Now, when a woman cries softly, as if the tears came slowly from the heart, the nobler and honester the man the heavier the gentle tempest smites him, and there are but two ways of meeting it—annihilate the lesser storm by a greater, a veritable tornado against a mid-summer outbreak, and be a brute in your passion, or fly for shelter until the skies are clear. What could Martin do but say:

'The Lord forbid, lass. Ha' done with weeping; we'll say no more of it,' and then

show how he thought no more of it, by spending the next three hours tramping Rye beach in a more evil temper than Martin Hughes had ever dreamed lay in Martin Hughes. No man knows how dear a thing is to his heart till the hope of it is crushed out.

The seven days that thereafter crept so wearily far from one another's heels were days of heaviness. The burden of death is ever a heavy one, whether that which lies dead is hope, honour, ambition, or any other of the passions men are playthings to, or that love which hath been life itself. And so the days were days of heaviness. Then, Martin Hughes coming upon Mary Barriscote stitching hard at garments which were certainly none of women's wear, suspicion was added to this burden ; and, like a fool, he bore the heartbreak for a full day, then spoke out, asking bluntly and with scant grace what things these were.

Now, women's ways are truly hard of comprehension even to a man in love.

'What of this?' said Mary, stitching the harder. 'Nay! how could a man go west with Drake without a woman to look to him first, and you with neither mother nor sister to set you on your way in comfort?'

Upon which, for neither rhyme nor reason,

but to show, I suppose, that the comfort went not all westward, she flung garment, thread, needle, tape and what-not all on the table, and her head on top of the heap, and broke out a-crying.

‘But——’ said Martin, and because that restlessness was in his bones, there, like a fool, he stopped, not knowing which way the good lay.

‘But,’ said Mary between her sobs, ‘if Manoa-land lie not for you here in Rye, then go westward with Drake and seek it. What joy to me to hold you here fretting your heart out? It’s only a year—or—or two years—or—or three, and—oh, my God! I would Philip of Spain had choked Peter Morgan ere he came here.’

And the weeping that came now was no quiet weeping, but a passion of grief under the shadow of bereavement.

And now the wind was from the other quarter. It was Martin who, honestly enough on the surface, would have nought of Manoa, and Mary who, out of naked misery, open and hidden, would have nought but Manoa.

‘Better love me and go,’ said she, ‘than bide and fret till fret breed resentment and resentment hate. Better a three-years’ sorrow than a thirty-years’ canker.’

And in the end, Martin, being the weaker of the two for all his talk, went westward with Drake, full at the last of Manoa and its riches, and by that much, as well as by reason of his coarser fibre, the less stricken at the parting.

In any case, it is the woman who bides at home who suffers. With the man, the new world and its importunities fill the blank. But the woman, hourly face to face with the beggary of her happiness, her loss, and her silence, finds no such easy comfort, and for her the world grows dark.

But it is not with Mary and her over-late, barren repentance of her wilful sacrifice that we have to do, a repentance that is the reaction of loneliness when the grandeur of abnegation shows poor and gray. Self-sacrifice is so magnificent and endurable until the consequences come! Nor yet, indeed, with Martin Hughes in that weary journey westward, now tempest, and now a drifting calm, with its grievous check at Grand Canary, and its none too joyous rendezvous at the Admiral's old anchorage—a journey of dissension and disaster, overshadowed first by the death of old John Hawkins, weary enough of life after his seventy-five years of this world with its buffets to spirit as to body, but never weary of fighting

the Queen's battles. Sad hearts they were, every one, on that small fleet of twenty-six sail when they laid the grand old sailor to his rest off Puerto Rico.

Thence to La Hacha to a barren conquest, on to Santa Marta and Nombre de Dios, whence Martin tasted the flavour of Spain and the new world for the first time in Baskerville's ill-fated expedition up the Chagres. Thence across the Musquito Gulf to the deadly paradise of Escudo de Veragua, sowing the seeds of pestilence in every breath drawn in the glory of the luxuriant undergrowth. Within a month of laying Hawkins to rest the shadow had loomed yet deeper, and Francis Drake himself, the brain and soul of the attack, had passed away.

A mighty funeral that which bowed all hearts with sorrow that December day off Porto Bello; and a fitting procession it was which swept downward through the depths with England's best sea-warrior, a procession of battered war-ships and Spanish prizes, and flung across the face of the waters rolled the pall of smoke from the Spanish forts as they went up in flame, a fiery sacrifice to the manes of the dead.

A voyage, truly, of disaster and death, but

with which, after all, we have little to do, seeing that this is a story of the finding of Manoa and not of the losing of heroes.

It's a far cry from Porto Bello to north of the Mexican Sea, and to tell how Martin Hughes and eight of the nineteen who adventured with him fared on their way would fill an hour to the full, and yet leave overmuch untold, the marvel of the tale being not so much that they lost eleven men in winning their way, but rather that nine set foot on the coast.

A war-worn nine they were, and worn by more battles than those fought with the Spaniards. Their own element, the sea, had dealt savagely with them, battering into desperate state the boat wherein they had made their adventure. Disease had grappled them almost from the first, choking two, and even now held three hard by the throat. Hunger had laid close siege, starving two more into the quiet submission of death. Thirst, and thirst's near ally, tropic heat, had fought on the side of Spain and slain one by the way.

Of the other six, five had death dealt out in open warfare; and of the sixth it were better not to ask too closely, for like as not the Inquisition would tell no truths pleasant to be learned.

Thus the nine were war-worn and spent in

spirit when, as near as they dared to San Jose, they faced away from the waters. Their clothing was in rags, their bodies gaunt with privation and sickness, their stubborn tenacity of spirit strained to breaking. Hitherto the journey had been, at the worst, coastwise and by salt water. Now the beloved sea was a thing of the bygone, and for the first time there came a real counting of the cost, and with the counting came discord and disruption.

‘Manoa is overfar,’ said some, ‘and no man knoweth where it lies. What matter that we set out to seek Manoa if we find instead El Dorado, and with it the better prize? Gold of the one weighs as heavy and shines as bright as gold of the other. Drake himself—God rest him!—has shifted a worse plan for a better before now: why not we?’

As all the world knew, El Dorado lay clustered round the Lake of Nicaragua. But where was this Manoa? A far cry to El Dorado, forsooth! Well, at the worst, it was for the most part a cry over a sailor-man’s natural home, the bonny sea, and not a cry over the Lord alone knew what desperate chances of swamp, forest, desert, plain, or mountain, as was the cry to this Manoa. Better take ship again and fare west.

So for one grievous day there was a bitter strife.

‘Better the swamp and all the rest of it, and I grant the risks,’ said Martin, ‘than that accursed back-track to the San Juan River.’

If of twenty men hard fed and with their lives whole in them eleven died on the outward journey, how many—such as they were now, shadows in strength and spirit—would live through the return? Plainly, none. Or, worse, live they might until it pleased Spain to send them to heaven in a chariot of fire. Better the savagery of the unknown than the tender mercies of Spain.

‘No El Dorado for me,’ said Martin. ‘Manoa I vowed I’d seek, and Manoa I’ll find, if I die for it. The plan hath cost overmuch for a shift at this time of day; and if I die, please God, I’ll die as becomes a man, and not in some filthy Spanish prison.’

As for the where, Manoa lay north and west—more north than west, maybe—and another hundred miles or two of a tramp would be of small account at the journey’s end when the gains were reckoned up. Manoa for him. So again there was bitter strife, and that day Englishmen had well-nigh done Spain’s work one upon the other.

In the end, seven took to their crazy boat once more and fared south by west again, nor were ever heard of in this world ; and two—Martin Hughes and tarry Peter Morgan—broke their way into the woods, supremely certain, with the calm assurance of post-Armada men, that the looting of Manoa to their advantage was but a question of discovery.

Positions had shifted with Martin Hughes and Peter Morgan. While on salt water the latter had to lead, and Martin obeyed like a good sailor and an honest Englishman, seeing that of the two Peter Morgan was the better versed in seaman's craft. Now, with the blue sea behind their backs, and neither one nor other knowing what before, it was Martin who, as the bolder spirit, the more sanguine, and the more determined, led the way. To say truth, had it not been for a certain shamefacedness, Peter Morgan had joined the seven who fared seaward. But as evils thickened upon them, his conscience grew burdened with the thought of Mary Barriscote and the useless mischief wrought by his prating tongue. So, for very shame's sake, he clung fast to Martin.

A pathetic expedition it was, and forlorn enough when reckoned by any other measure save that of ignorance and courage, in both of

which they lacked little. For weapons they had stout hangers, and each a Spanish knife in the waistbelt, and each a musket, with more of rust than ammunition. For clothes they had but rags.

It had been about the New Year when they thrust out from Porto Bello ; since then the moon had waxed and shrunk many a time, and now all count of days and weeks had long been past ; nor, thenceforward, for years to come did Martin Hughes reckon time except by seasons and sorrows, and of both he lost count.

The story of the early struggles may be left aside for the present ; some day they may be worth the telling. Their record was the record of dogged perseverance and uncommensurate gain. Nay, worse, of no gain at all, since the end was no nearer for the labour. Then the day came when Peter Morgan, for all his remorse, would fain have turned back and braved even the Governor of Nombre de Dios himself for the sake of the sea washing the coast. But Martin would none of it, and in the main Martin was right.

‘Nay, man,’ said he, ‘we’ve faced nor-west by north over-long to make a back-track. The sea’s as near before as behind, mayhap nearer by scores of miles. To turn back is to

give up hope, and here hope is life ; but, what's more to the purpose, we came after Manoa-land, and to Manoa we'll fare, and nowhere else.'

Not once, or twice, or thrice came the conflict, and each time the masterfulness of Martin Hughes overbore the other till the day came when the elder man laid himself down under the compulsion of a still greater masterfulness than that of Martin Hughes, for Death hearkens to no man's nay.

It was the early summer-time, when the nights were warm and starlit, and the days bright with the quick fulfilment of a new life's promise ; and saving for the weight of the hand laid upon him, Peter Morgan was at ease.

The grip tightened slowly, for it was the simple weakness of nature that was the strength of death, but for all its slowness both men knew that the grip tightened daily. At no time these months past had there been much talk between the two. Their daily present had had but little of comfort. Even from Martin's expectation the glamour of Manoa had at last faded, and so the future held but little of good. Once Peter Morgan had rambled back to the past, Rye beach, the swirl of the Rother, and bonny Mary Barriscote, till the bitterness of Martin's heart broke out so that he roundly cursed the

other between his teeth, and bade him be silent for a fool.

Therefore it came that they talked but little ; but as the grip tightened and the face of death was reflected in the face of the living, Peter Morgan spoke.

‘ Martin lad, get you east again when all’s done wi’ me. Manoa-land’s a fool’s errand to seek after wi’ love left behind. Get you back to bonny Mary Barriscote, and the Lord forgive me that I brought you from her, for a dying man sees more than a living.’

Whereat Martin grit his teeth together and held the other’s hand the firmer, saying nothing, though in his heart he thought the bidding easy enough, the doing none so easy.

‘ Ay, a fool’s errand wi’ love behind, and all my doing. Yet, I’m not so blind but I know if it were to do over again, and the Admiral bid me win ye west, win ye I would, knowing all I do, for needs must that Admiral Drake ha’ his way.’

Then he sighed and mumbled to himself of Drake’s old sea-fights, with growing intervals between his babble, till he turned his face to the darkest part of the cave where he lay, and was silent, and, to Martin, dead—but that his hand kept its grip.

The day had worn into grayness beyond the face of the rocks, when suddenly Peter Morgan turned his head.

‘Hist!’ he said, ‘it’s callin’ me, it’s callin’ me, the whish o’ the waters, the whish, the whish, and the wrastle; God’s music o’ surf an’ swirl. I never held wi’ the text, “An’ there was no more sea.” A poor thing the world an’ God’s sea blotted out; but it’s there, praises be, for I hear it beat. An’ Drake’s a-sailing it, ay, an’ Hawkins an’ Gilbert.’ He struggled up on his left arm and held out his right, listening. ‘God be thanked for the sea in the world to come, an’ it’s callin’, it’s callin’, it’s callin’. Come aboard, Admiral Drake—come aboard, sir, come abo——’ And then Martin Hughes was left to seek out Manoa-land alone.

Waking up nine mornings later, he found six copper-skinned Indian warriors sitting round him, and scant as had been the time since Morgan’s death, the sound of human voices, for all that he understood them not at all, reconciled him to the slavery that followed.

Thenceforward he was the servant of a wandering tribe drifting north or south, east or west, with equal indifference and without plan; kindly treated, yet guarded in such a fashion that there was no escape, even had he

desired it. Of Manoa, when he came to know their tongue, he heard neither hint nor rumour, nor was there aught of gold, or indeed of any metal, in all the tribe's poor belongings. Yet for all the silence, servitude, and discouragement, the stubborn heart of the man clung to the fulfilment of his quest.

If there had been but a broken record of time in the past, there was none now, and the days followed each other as shadows. Little by little the Indian life grew into Martin Hughes, and, after a sullen fashion, he was content.

As months passed, skins and clothing of woven grasses took the place of the rags, linking him to those dim days beyond the Musquito Gulf, and in an outward show he was Indian. Of simple needs, Nature's common supplies were ordinarily sufficient for all wants, but once there fell a drought that withered up the fruits and drove far afield both bird and beast to seek for water. Needs must that Manitou be supplicated, and with all haste the tribe sped eastward, and day by day grew fewer and more gaunt as thirst and hunger struck the weak and sickly from their ranks. Day by day they tramped on, halting for none, child, chief, or woman, till of a sudden a glint of fretted lights broke through the trees, and Martin

Hughes's Indian heart leaped in an English breast at sight of the sea—leaped, and leaped again to see, not two furlongs from the beach, a stout galleon with the red cross of St. George flying bravely at the foremast.

The years went to the winds and Manoa with them, and before five minutes were passed Martin Hughes was plunging through the surf with all his heart aflame at the thought of England and the sight of England's flag.

We may leave untold the regeneration of a Sussex Englishman out of a Western savage, and tramp into Rye town with Martin Hughes in the dusk of a December afternoon.

The world moved more leisurely then than now, and as he tramped down the village street it was to find nothing so changed as himself. Except for life, death, and men's growth, Rye was as Rye had been. That none knew him was small wonder, since who would recognise the lad of twenty or but little more in the sorrowful-faced man of worse than two-score, and to none he told his name.

The Queen's Good Hope Inn had long changed to the King's Crown, but there was still the old gossip in the porch even in the gloom of a winter's evening.

'A supper and a bed? Ay, an' welcome,

an he could pay for it. These were troublous times, and there were many rogues about—as when were rogues scant and the times not troublous? No offence, but there were over-many loose-bred sailors from foreign parts flung on the country, to live as they best might out of honest folks. A dozen, roaring drunk, had passed Hastings way not an hour gone, and God grant some poor innocent suffered not before morning. Gold pieces? That's another story, master. Good pay makes sure welcome. No offence, but a man must look after his own. Changes in Rye town? Ay, ay, changes enough. Ship - building? Nay, that had drifted west, and was like to drift faster since the sea was silting up the old harbour-way. What name was that? Barriscote? Barriscote? Barriscote? Mistress, a sailor-man's seeking Barriscotes. I'm none so long here myself, y' see, but she'll know. Born and bred, and lived every inch of her life in Rye town. Oh, ay, I have them now. There was but one left, a lass, and things went crooked with her, not one year, but five or six. Things drift, y' see, with none but a woman to see to them. She was sore put to it, poor soul, to keep soul and body in health. Ay, ay, so 'twas. She married Phil Hargraves there,

Hastings way, and God grant they have no trouble to-night, for the house lies ready to the hand of such a crew as I told ye on. A sailor-man himself, Phil Hargraves, and one who had picked the Don's pocket to a pretty tune, if all were true folks heard; and ay, ay, there was that other story of a bribe in the hand whereby a Spanish prison swallowed a ship's company to Hargraves' profit. Lies, no doubt, though the story had a curious fashion of cropping up, if 'twere all a lie. If they lads who passed were by chance some of them who had saved their skins, why Hargraves is four miles out, and not a soul for woman or bairn to cry to. God save the man! Was he mad, craving supper and then fleeing the house in such a fashion? An ill-looking rogue and well rid of.'

Into the darkness, Hastings way, Martin Hughes was swinging at a man's pace, with no very clear thought in his head but that the blacker the darkness and the colder the night, the better for him till his brain got time to think.

That Mary should marry, that he had schooled himself to expect, or thought he had, since there is none a man can so easily deceive as himself, but now the blunt truth in plain words was like a grip on the throat, choking back the life. Marry, and for bread, while he,

who should have been her man, tramped the Indies seeking Manoa and finding nought. Curse—curse whom? Himself—who else? and on through the blackness of the wintry byways Martin Hughes tramped, wrath and self-reproach shredding the good of life to pieces with every thought of the past, the present, and the days to come.

Presently his hearing, long trained in the New World's forest silences, caught the sound of voices seawards down from the road, voices held in check, and yet, to an alert ear like Martin's, voices with a menace in them.

A stretch of pasture, broken by blurs of thickly-set leafless trees, lay down to the left, and beyond them a darker and more solid curve told of pine, fir, and such-like shelter timber drawn across the west. As he paused, listening, it came upon him in a flash that hereabouts lived the Mary Barriscote that once had been, and hereabouts was the rabble of mischief set upon doing the devil's work.

Schooled by his woodman's instinct, Martin Hughes shirked the pasture and plunged into the black shelter of the pine belt, and swiftly, soundlessly skirted round behind the house which lay hidden somewhere in the darkness. Presently the loom of it came against the sky, and Martin Hughes crept from the shelter and

picked his way to the stout back doorway facing seawards.

From the front came the babble of many voices in careful importunity. A demand, the silence of an unheard reply, and a demand reiterated again and once again.

‘Hargraves the traitor! Hargraves the traitor!’ therein was the burden of the demand, varied with curses and hard words. Piecing together a word to a word, a sentence to a sentence, Martin Hughes told himself a tale of greedy treachery these many years gone by, a slinking into hiding of the traitor and a hunting down by unrelenting vengeance, and now at the last it was ‘Hargraves or fire!’

From the silence between the gusts of passion, passion the more deadly from the cool intent that curbed it back from its own frustration by overmuch anger, from the silence Martin judged that Hargraves was absent, and that Hargraves’ wife and children were there alone to bear his sins’ weight thrust upon them. After a Spanish prison, vengeance is vengeance, and there is no room for nicety as to whom it falls upon. Hargraves’ wife and Hargraves’ bairns must pay for Hargraves. Hargraves’ wife to them, Mary Barriscote to Martin Hughes, and so Martin knocked softly on the oaken panel, knocked softly again and again.

Presently there came a voice from within—
Mary's voice :

‘ Burn an ye will, you murderers of children !
Philip Hargraves is out of reach.’

‘ Hist !’ said Martin, ‘ hist, Mary !’

Within, could he but have seen it, the woman fell a-trembling. Not that she knew the voice, but he called her Mary, and in her despair it seemed as if God were nearer than she thought.

‘ Softly, Mary lass ; softly now : these devils are all to the front. Down with the bar and make no noise.’

‘ And who—— ?’

‘ It's Martin Hughes come home, Mary Barriscote, and down with the bar before all's lost.’

‘ You lie ! Martin Hughes is dead.’

‘ My God ! Mary woman, will you slip the bar ? They're tramping this way.’

An instant's pause, the jar of a bolt shot back, the creak of a heavy bar turning on its pivot, and none too soon the door was opened and shut with Martin within.

Back against the wall shrunk a woman but little like the Mary Barriscote of a score of years gone by—old and worn in the face, and seeming older and more worn for the play of shadows from the rushlight thrust in a sconce five feet away.

From the room above came the fretful wail of an infant in pain or terror, and more than all the score of years the cry of the child came between them.

Without a word Martin Hughes crushed out the rushlight, and in the darkness turned again to the door, now shaking under the buffets of those without.

‘Get you back,’ he said to the woman, ‘back to your children, and leave me to handle this affair. Only, first, them they seek is——’

‘Away !’

‘Ay, away ; that settles it. Back then to the children.’

And a shadow crept into the darkness, and presently the wail was hushed.

With all his strength Martin Hughes smote the door with his clenched fist, and at the stroke within the buffeting from without ceased and a voice cried :

‘Trapped, y’ fox ! Come out an’ die like a man, if there’s aught of man in you. Three minutes now or we’ll burn you out !’

And Martin Hughes answered back :

‘Two words to that. A house on fire’s light enough to shoot a man by ; ay, an’ two, or three, or four. Four lives in here ; four lives with you. It’s an even score.’

‘You hound ! you traitor hound ! The

thought's like you. Kill wife an' weans to glut your slaughter—that's Phil Hargraves.'

'Fool's talk,' said Martin ; 'there's room for terms, an' you know it.'

'Terms? Ay! Well, then, come out and die like a man, an' we'll lay no finger-touch on wife or bairn.'

'Stick or stone—you swear it?' cried Martin.

'We swear it,' the voice answered, and on the heels of the words there was a hubbub of hoarse shouts binding the pact.

Back in its socket the rusty bolt was shot, the oaken bar creaked once again on its pivot, and, framed in the gray of the doorway, Martin Hughes stood looking out into the night.

From the outer darkness came a snarl of execration, the sudden loom of three, four, five gray shadows, a moment's scuffle, a fall, and the soft thud of hurrying feet upon grass, then silence.

Slowly the floorway just within the door was thrust up, and from a cellar Hargraves' white face peered out at a darker shadow, prone and black against the shadows of the night.

When all's said and done, the Land of Manoa was none so far from Rye.

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